Of Black and Gold: the Battling Minds
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Of Black and Gold: the Battling Minds

by AzuliaStar

Summary

"There are battles fought with wands, and there are battles fought with hearts - but the deadliest wars are those that rage within the mind."

As the war outside Hogwarts escalates and Regulus Black is drawn deeper into the Revolution's grasp, it is the battle within his own mind that he is truly forced to fight.

Regulus laughed, dodging his advance and lobbing another snowball.

"Britain's most promising Chaser, my arse — you can't even throw a proper snowball, Potter!"

"Oh, you're one to talk!" Potter shot back, narrowly missing Regulus with a counter-attack. "That aim's nothing to brag about, Black!"

Notes

Hi everyone!

So, here we go: the second part of the Of Black & Gold series. I'm very excited, and I hope you are too. The same warnings as the first book apply; graphic depictions of literally everything (violence, abuse, sex and so forth), so you're warned.

If you haven't read the first book, I highly recommend you do; you could, possibly, read this book on its own, but you won't understand the depth of if that way.

As always, thanks for reading and I can't wait to hear what you guys think!

Chapter 1: Prologue

“Oh, *Merlin*, was that the most horrid dinner you’ve ever attended, or what?”

Regulus glanced over at Isa, who lay sprawled across a lounger in the courtyard, hands covering her eyes as if trying to erase the memory of the evening they’d just survived.

He snorted. “Would you believe me if I said it wasn’t?”

Isa opened her eyes, turning her head to catch his gaze, a smirk playing on her lips.

“Considering I can now count myself lucky enough to have survived dinner with your psycho cousin *and* your mother, I absolutely believe you.”

“‘Oh, let me help you with that, Mrs. Black’—” Regulus mimicked her, exaggerating the eagerness in her voice.

Isa gave him a look, then laughed. “Right, and your little performance was much better, almost choking on a bean when my dad *pointedly* mentioned that we wouldn’t be sharing rooms.”

Regulus groaned at the memory, burying his face in his hands.

They were currently lying sprawled in the courtyard of Isa’s family estate in Damascus. It was two weeks into the summer holidays and his first night in Syria.

Of course, it would have been too simple to just show up in the Nott’s fireplace, exchange pleasantries, and slip away with Isa. No — his parents insisted on accompanying him – as per tradition – and subjecting everyone to an excruciating dinner, during which Regulus had barely spoken a word, and Isa hadn’t stopped talking.

It had been horrible.

Now, fortunately, Father and Mother had left – leaving Regulus to the devices of the Nott family for nearly a month. Spending time with Isa was far from a punishment, but a repeat of the Easter Holidays – barring Narcissa’s wedding – would have been better, for then they would have only had to deal with Uncle Alphard’s presence, rather

than with that of both Isa's parents and both her little sisters. Not that they weren't nice, but well, there wasn't much that beat being alone and shameless with Isa.

As they lay sprawled onto the lounges in the cool evening air, Isa turned to him with a mischievous smile. "Want a tour?"

"Let's do it," he replied, his gaze drifting appreciatively over the courtyard.

Of course the estate was breathtaking. The courtyard, a tranquil heart in the centre of it all, was anchored by a mosaic-tiled fountain, its water reflecting the floating candles at night. Tiled walkways radiated from this central space, leading to the entrance hall, the reception room, the dining room, the kitchen, and the drawing room. Every wall was adorned with intricate mosaic patterns in deep blues, warm terracotta, and hints of gold. The estate's signature feature seemed to be the dome-shaped skylights, charmed to remain open to the sky just like the enchanted ceiling at Hogwarts. By day, sunlight poured through; by night, a sky full of stars stretched overhead.

Upstairs lay the private family quarters, where also Regulus's guest room was located. Still, despite the breathtaking courtyard, the hammam-style bathrooms and the enchanting domes, there were two places that drew Regulus's attention most – the rooftop terrace, which boasted an astronomy corner, and, of course, the library.

As they wandered through the halls, Regulus slowed, his gaze catching on the double doors of the library. The entrance was framed in polished wood, with curling vines and gilded script carved into its surface. He paused, fingers brushing the intricate details.

Isa noticed and turned back, rolling her eyes in playful exasperation. "Oh, I'm sorry — I almost deprived you of your treasure," she smirked. "Go on, you swot."

He shot her a sarcastic look before eagerly opening the doors. He suppressed the urge to gawk – the room was stunning. Dark walnut shelves stretched toward the high, domed ceiling, where the charmed skylights displayed the evening stars. The shelves were filled with leather-bound books and cloth volumes in different languages — English, French, Runes, Arabic, Aramaic. Delicate brass lanterns hung from above, casting a warm amber glow that danced across the tiled floor in shifting geometric patterns. The floors, cool and polished stone, were softened by richly coloured rugs.

Isa grinned. “There you are. The stuff of your wildest dreams.”

“Look at this,” Regulus murmured, letting his fingers trace the spines of different volumes – *Arcana Arithmantica*, *Grimoires of the Ancient World*, *Forbidden Spells of the Eastern Seas.* Sure, the libraries he knew were beautiful, and any room lined with books was stunning in itself, but this was something else. And it was fascinating to get a glimpse of the Nott family’s collection; with Magnus Nott’s business empire spanning across continents, their library was bound to hold more than a few rare and interesting volumes.

As he made his way deeper into the room, he noticed an aisle closed off by a thick, velvet cord. He didn’t cross it, but even from a distance, he could make out the titles of several oversized books. *The Occult of Occlumency*, *Secrets of the Veil*, *Obscura Magicae*…

So many forbidden subjects, so many forgotten topics, so much power hidden within these pages. If people only realised how much power was wielded by nothing more than words…

“That’d be the restricted section,” Isa said, raising an eyebrow. “Dad’s forbidden me from looking at any of those. Pretty sure he’d kill me if I did.”

Regulus grinned. “Well, best we head out, then, before he stumbles in here and gets the wrong idea.”

Once the tour was over, they headed to their respective rooms to get ready for the night. Regulus had just brushed his teeth and was about to collapse into bed, completely knackered, when he heard a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called.

The door creaked open, revealing Isa in her nightdress, a small bag in her hand. Regulus raised a questioning eyebrow as she closed the door and placed the bag on his nightstand.

“I brewed you some new potions,” she said quietly, her tone cautious, aware of the sensitivity of the topic.

Regulus offered her a small, appreciative smile. “Thanks.”

He really hoped she would leave it at that — drop off the potions, say goodnight, and head back to her room — but he’d known her long enough to brace himself for what would come next.

“How have you been?” she asked gently, her eyes searching his face.

Regulus averted his gaze, busying himself with the duvet, and gave a short, “Alright, Ies.”

“Are you sleeping?”

Regulus closed his eyes. In essence, he had been sleeping better lately. The nightmares had dulled to a manageable level; where he used to wake up shuddering in fear, now it was something else that left him shuddering at night. But he could hardly tell Isa who he’d been dreaming of, or the kinds of feelings those dreams evoked. He could barely look at himself in the mirror on those mornings, dawn just breaking, his entire body burning with desire, imagining it wasn’t his own hands under the covers but rather…

He swallowed.

“Better,” he replied curtly, still not meeting her gaze.

Isa paused, her voice barely a whisper. “Are you — are you ever going to talk about it?”

Regulus looked up, meeting her deep brown eyes, full of worry. He sighed – talk about it?

“I… I don’t know, Ies,” he admitted, rubbing his face with a hint of exasperation. “I – I don’t know.”

“If you don’t talk about it, Reg,” she replied gently, “I can’t help you…”

Regulus couldn’t suppress the mirthless snort coming out of him. “You can’t help me, Ies.”

Silence stretched between them. Finally, Isa placed a hand on his arm, offering a soft, lingering squeeze.

“Alright,” she whispered. “Goodnight, Reg.”

She retreated toward the door, casting one last worried glance over her shoulder before slipping out, leaving Regulus alone in the quiet room.

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The next morning, Regulus was woken abruptly by the loud sound of his door bursting open.

Still half-asleep, he rubbed his eyes, barely able to process the existential questions of who and where he was, when he felt the unmistakable sensation of someone jumping onto his bed. His mattress sank and jolted under the weight of an energetic girl, mercilessly bouncing on top of him.

“REG!” she screamed, her voice way too high for this unholy hour.

“*Oh*,” Regulus groaned, squinting up to find two blond figures moving about in their pyjamas. He winced as he took in the sight of both Isa’s little sisters – already wide awake and playing around like it was midday. “Morning, Ariadna.”

He glanced toward the doorway, where the slightly older girl lingered, half-hidden behind the door frame.

“And you too, Elara.”

Elara, the middle sister, offered him a shy smile. Only when Regulus motioned for her to join them did she dare to step into the room.

Ariadna, though — that girl was a whole other story. Just as fearless as she was merciless, she resumed her relentless bouncing, leaving no body part of Regulus untouched or unharmed.

“I’ve missed you, Reg!” Ariadna shrieked, finally pausing her jumps to study him with an unnervingly intense gaze for someone that age. “Your hair is long.”

Regulus pushed a stray curl out of his face, blinking. It wasn’t *that* long – Mother had let the hairdresser cut it just two weeks ago; his hair barely brushed his shoulders.

“Well, *your* hair’s long,” he replied, still too foggy to come up with anything better. In his defence – Ariadna’s hair *was* long; tumbling in golden waves, just like her sisters’.

Isa appeared at the doorway in her night robe, looking annoyed. “Merlin, I told you he’d come downstairs *himself*,” she said. “Did they wake you, Reg?”

He glanced from Ariadna, still bouncing with delight, to Elara, who

had cautiously settled at the foot of the bed.

“Nah, it’s alright.”

Ariadna shot him a mischievous grin, her brown eyes glinting with a mischief that reminded him of Isa’s – she had the same quick wit, the same sass. Regulus imagined Isa must have been exactly like her as a child – of course, he had known her as a child, but he’d been a child himself then, which did much for one’s perspective.

“I’ve read your letters,” Ariadna smirked, leaning in as if sharing a secret.

“Letters?” Regulus asked, scratching his head. He was certain he’d only sent a short letter, hardly enough to be memorable. He glanced over at Isa, who was now blushing furiously — and then it clicked.

“Oh,” he said, grinning, the realisation spreading across his face. “My *letters*.”

Isa’s face turned a darker shade of red. “I told you not to tell anyone!” she yelped, quickly closing the door behind her to cut off any potential eavesdroppers. “No more unlimited chocolate frogs for you —”

“Who cares?” Ariadna replied, her voice dripping with sass. “He already knows about them — *he’s the one who wrote them*.”

Regulus leaned back, folding his arms contentedly. “Yes,” he nodded, playing along. “But my memory’s been a bit spotty. Remind me, what did I write again?”

Isa’s face was a mixture of mortification and panic as Ariadna gleefully launched into an exaggerated recitation, her eyes sparkling. “‘Oh Isa, your eyes are *like a thousand stars,* so magical they make me forget to breathe–’”

Regulus couldn’t hold back his laughter as Isa frantically tried to stop her sister, waving her hands and practically pleading with her.

“Stop, Ariadna!” she cried, darting forward to cover her sister’s mouth, but Ariadna squirmed out of reach, unfazed.

“—’and the brightness of your smile makes even the sun jealous’!” Ariadna continued, her grin growing. “And, ‘your eyes are so deep I could drown in them’.” She looked at Regulus with a sly grin. “Is that

right?"

Regulus was doubled over in laughter, tears forming in his eyes. "Sounds about right," he managed between breaths. "You remembered every word."

"Oh, I know more!" Ariadna screamed proudly. "'When I close my eyes'–"

Regulus held up his hands in mock surrender, still laughing. "Alright, alright. Isa, you'd better call a truce before she spills any more of my most heartfelt prose."

Isa finally managed to shush her sister, steering her toward the door with a red face.

"Out, both of you. Now!"

As Ariadna and Elara left the room, still giggling, Isa shot Regulus a very sharp look whose edges were rather softened by her flushed state.

"You *tosser*," she cursed.

"Oh, you *love* me, Nott," he smirked. "You *radiant star*, lighting my *darkest nights*."

Only the rather painful sensation of Isa throwing a pillow in his face, shut Regulus up.

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The rest of the day, though, Regulus made a quiet mission of casually quoting snippets of Davies' lines, thoroughly enjoying the sentiment of riling Isa up. When they took Elara and Ariadna out for a few laps on their toy brooms, he instructed them not to fly so high as to reach the 'thousand stars that reminded him of Isa's eyes'. And later, when they were having tea with Isa's parents, he mentioned with an innocent smile that he could 'just drown' in his tea, eyes flicking meaningfully toward Isa.

The level of annoyance from Isa had been delightful.

However, as the evening wore on and Regulus, Isa and her sisters sat

together in the drawing room, he decided to ease up on the teasing a bit. The girls were freshly bathed, and Elara was deeply absorbed in a magical storybook, from which characters occasionally sprang to life, partially illustrating scenes from the story before fading back onto the pages. Meanwhile, Isa attempted to braid Ariadna's hair with her wand – but she was, frankly, doing a *lousy* job.

"So," Isa said, still struggling with a stray lock, "have you heard anything from Barty or Evan?"

Regulus shrugged. "A letter or two. Evan's spending the summer at their place in Cornwall, and Barty's off with his family in Germany."

"That's got to be fun," Isa said darkly. "Being the son of Crouch Sr. these days…"

Regulus nodded. She had a point. Crouch Sr., as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, had recently pushed the Ministry toward a much harsher stance on illegal Dark magic, pressing for stricter punishments, increased Azkaban sentences, and a general tightening of suspect rights — the latest in his 'tough-on-dark-magic' campaign. Regulus was very pleased that it had all been announced just before the Ministry's recess – perhaps the commotion could die down a bit before Barty was back in the Slytherin common room where they would definitely pester him with his father's political direction.

"You looking forward to France?" Isa asked with a smirk as she attempted, yet again, to tame a lock of Ariadna's hair. Regulus watched the process with a touch of dismay — for someone whose own hair was always styled in intricate braids, Isa was doing a shockingly poor job with her sister's.

He shrugged. "I suppose. They offered me a way out, actually."

"What do you mean?" Isa asked, raising an eyebrow and finally managing to wrestle one strand into place.

"Well, since it's our O.W.L. year and Beauxbatons' subjects don't entirely match with Hogwarts', they couldn't exactly insist on me missing so much of the term."

"So… you're not going?" Isa asked, now looking slightly confused.

Regulus let out a dark snort at the idea of Mother going easy on him. "Oh, no. I'm still going — just expected to catch up. Though I think

they'll go a bit easier on me with the exams and might let me follow a reduced load of Beauxbatons' classes, just so I can focus on my Hogwarts subjects too."

Isa nodded thoughtfully. "So, then… are you looking forward to it?"

He considered the question. "Not particularly," he admitted. "But it'll be… interesting. They've got a different approach to magic over there. A more international crowd, too, so it might be… interesting."

Isa nodded. "Yes, well, my cousins attend Beauxbatons, of course – but they're always very private about it."

As she continued her braiding attempts, Regulus watched her create a new tangle with her wand, resulting in a twisted, uneven mess, and at that, he couldn't hold back any longer.

"Nott, stop it — what the *hell* are you trying to accomplish here?"

She shot him a sharp look. "Language!" she hissed, glancing pointedly at her sisters.

"Right, sorry – sorry." He scooted over, reaching out for her wand. "But just… let me show you."

Without waiting for permission, he pushed Isa further aside and took her wand in one hand, pulled out his own with the other, and worked both wands to weave a sophisticated fishtail braid into Ariadna's hair, the strands intertwining seamlessly with each flick.

"That, Nott, is how you braid," he said, annoyed.

Isa stared at him, wide-eyed. "Where did you learn that?"

"Cissy's shown me a few tricks," he said with a shrug, unable to hide a smirk as Isa looked thoroughly impressed.

Isa's expression shifted to a grin. "Well, go on then, show me what you've got."

She plopped down on the floor in front of him, settling in.

He smirked, going for an exaggerated professional tone. "Alright, Miss Nott. What are we going for today? Loose and elegant or something more sophisticated?"

Isa let out her signature howl of laughter, tilting her head back.

“Alright then, Mr. Black. Let’s go with a perfect French twist — and let’s see if it lives up to all the hype.”

Chapter 2: Of Occlumency & Libraries

In essence, Regulus was rather surprised at how pleasant it was to spend the summer holidays in Damascus. They filled their days with playing and swimming with Ariadna and Elara when they weren't homeschooled by their governor, and with endless dips in the nearby pond, chess, newspaper analyses — and, in the case of Regulus, writing for the *Pure Quill* in secret. As it turned out, quite a few students had subscribed to the bulletin before the end of term, and Regulus had recently received another praising note from Thorne after sending a draft by owl.

Another perk of the holidays was the surprising easygoing nature of Isa's parents; they were either kind and engaging company or simply elsewhere; Mr. Nott was preoccupied with work, and Mrs. Nott was deeply involved in organising a committee related to Levantine art, allowing Isa and Regulus plenty of freedom to do as they pleased.

Still, after more than two weeks of doing practically the same, Regulus and Isa found themselves rather bored, so, in an attempt to shake things up, they decided to work on some extracurricular magic. First, they tackled non-verbal spells; they were both able to perform them, but it still took a lot of effort and focus, and therefore strain. After days of dedicated practice, though, they had made significant progress; especially Isa, who had a very strong-willed mind. Regulus kept pace – but he could tell it took him more effort.

Now that they had conquered non-verbal magic for now – they agreed it was best to let it rest and solidify with time – they had turned their focus to Occlumency.

Having both been raised by skilled Occlumenses (for Isa, her father and for Regulus, Mother), they had dabbled in the art before. They had learned to shield their minds from intrusion to a degree that made it difficult for each other to break through; since they themselves weren't particularly skilled Occlumenses, though, it wasn't really the same as being probed into their brains by their parents. Still, although far from masters, they were capable enough to hold back even skilled Occlumenses on a good day. However, they had had little recent practice against powerful opponents – Mother hadn't had a reason to probe his thoughts for ages. So they decided to give the art a fresh try.

Thus, they had scanned the Nott's library — barring the restricted

section — and were currently in the process of combing out all relevant books on the subject and trying some stuff here and there; they had dedicated an entire guest room to their project, and it was now filled with open volumes, scattered parchments and scribbled notes.

It was a mindblowing topic — exploring how memories, thoughts, and emotions were etched into the mind, how they could be recalled by a mere trigger or buried, walled or compartmentalised if one knew the techniques. Although Isa excelled at non-verbal spells, here in Occlumency it was Regulus who truly shined.

It wasn't surprising, though — Regulus had learned at a very young age how to push thoughts, feelings and memories away, storing them in a box inaccessible for anyone; sometimes even himself. There were so many indescribable and unfathomable things that had happened to him in his formative years, that if he hadn't — he was sure that his soul would have torn in pieces.

It hadn't just been a coping mechanism, but also a survival strategy — and one that came in handy when trying to become a skilled Occlumens.

Not that Isa knew any of that — she just thought that he had a very strong mind and was very skilled at rationalising and compartmentalising feelings.

Having covered the basics, they were now captivated by the concept of Mind Shielding; creating blank walls or empty spaces without powerful thoughts, emotions or memories — so, basically, mental barriers deflecting intrusion. Now, there were different factors influencing the strength and stability of these shields, temporary things affecting the strength of the mind, like illness, hormonal fluctuations or fatigue, and more lasting factors.

Regulus was mostly intrigued by these lasting factors; soul-altering forces able to shake even the strongest Occlumens. Chief among these were things like love; particularly the heady, consuming phase of infatuation rather than the stable, settled affection that often followed; it was really the infatuation that eroded the mind's defences. Grief, closely related to love, was another such force – capable of weakening even the strongest mental barriers. And then there were acts altering one's soul in relation to another; this could be, for example, by killing someone – *taking* a soul, but it could also by *joining* souls – through genuine intimacy, when a true connection was forged between two

souls, so not the fleeting, drunk sex with a stranger, but the real connection all the way to the depth of one's soul.

"Alright," Isa said abruptly, breaking Regulus from a particularly difficult and vague paragraph on soul damage. "How about giving it a try?"

Regulus arched his eyebrows. "You mean – trying to get into each other's minds?"

Isa nodded. "Yes – we can read all the theory we want, but we'll have to practise if we really want to accomplish something, don't we?"

Regulus shrugged. "I guess – you remember the last time we did this?"

Isa grinned. "Third year, Christmas. You remember how good I was?"

Regulus nodded – she was very good. It had been terribly difficult to get into her brain, and even then it had been very void and confusing, the defences doing their job. It should not have surprised him, because Isa was clearly a very mentally strong person, but it had been terribly annoying anyway. Not that Isa could make much of Regulus's brain in turn – but well, he had expected it to be an easy job back then, and had been proven wrong.

"Well," Regulus said with a smile, pointing at her wand. "Ladies first."

Isa raised her wand, her gaze sharpening with focus. Regilus felt the subtle pressure as she murmured, "Legilimens," and a shiver ran through him as her mind brushed up against his. He braced himself, letting his mental barriers settle into place.

The initial feeling was faint, like a light hand pressing against a locked door – he could sense her pushing, trying to peer inside, but all she would find were hollow spaces he'd carefully constructed over the years. He focused on keeping his breathing steady, letting the emptiness drift up to meet her, like fog rolling over an empty landscape.

He felt her probing further, pushing against the barriers, and he knew what she'd see – fragments, scattered and meaningless. He imagined the flicker of a candle flame, an open, dark sea. A few memories slipped through, but too distorted to make sense – snippets of places and faces, but all elusive, just wisps that vanished the moment she tried to grasp them. He suppressed the urge to smirk, knowing he had

to stay focused.

But then, unexpectedly, he felt a sharper push – her focus intensifying. This was the crucial moment, the moment to test whether the barriers still worked. For a split second, a crack appeared — a rush of something very deep, almost too vast to contain. He could feel the weight, something sharp and intense, a memory of something, like the echo of a lost thread. Regulus immediately tightened his mental grip, and the barrier sealed shut again.

He sensed her retreat, the pressure loosening, and let out a breath, realising he'd been holding it. Isa's eyes opened, her brows furrowed.

"Impressive, Reg," she said, nodding with a look of quiet respect. "Very impressive."

Regulus managed a small smile. "Well — this was the easy part. When we start playing around with associations, it'll be harder."

This was true – probing someone's mind without direction was fun, but probing someone's mind while actively trying to evoke memories and feelings, that was the real deal.

"But let's save that for later," he added. He gestured to her with a slight bow. "May I have the honour, Miss Nott?"

Isa rolled her eyes and nodded, bracing herself for his attempt.

Regulus raised his wand, took a steadying breath, and whispered, "Legilimens."

At first, her mind felt like he remembered – strong, organised, a network of neatly compartmentalised thoughts and memories. He sensed her defences, more rigid than they'd been in the past, yet still permeable. He pushed deeper, but everything was hazy – as though she were already struggling to maintain her control. He could feel her presence resisting, but it didn't take much for him to break through the initial barrier. He withdrew quickly, feeling a bit surprised at the ease of it.

Isa exhaled sharply, her cheeks flushed. "Shit," she muttered, sighing heavily. "I'm *weak*. Why am I weak?"

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "Not exactly weak — stronger than most. But… easier than last time we tried." He studied her face, looking for signs of fatigue or illness – *oh*.

He felt a bit awkward raising it – even with his best friends both being female, it was a bit of an uncomfortable topic. “You’re not – you’re not…”

Isa, visibly unfazed by the suggestion Regulus was making, raised her eyebrows. “Are you asking me whether I’m on my period, Reg?”

Regulus bit an awkward laugh.

“Because I’m not,” she snapped, rolling her eyes. “So that’s not it.”

Regulus laughed, holding up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright,” he said with a hint of apology in his tone.

Isa squared her shoulders, lifted her chin defiantly. “Now try again. And this time, use association — really challenge me.”

He gave her a small, half-smile, accepting the challenge, and raised his wand again. With a murmured, “Legilimens,” he felt the connection open once more, this time letting his mind seek out something specific, something tied to an emotion or memory.

At first, everything was still and unyielding, void… Then – a faint melody floated into his awareness — a tune drifting through Isa’s mind, like a whisper, barely clear enough for him to hear. He put all his focus on the sound – letting it guide him deeper, following its thread as it wound its way through Isa’s thoughts. As he pressed further, he could feel her trying to block him out, her mental defences scrambling to shut him out. Yet the melody grew clearer, sharpening, and he sensed it was tied to something recent, something raw. Then, in his mind’s eye, he saw a familiar face beside her, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath – Davies.

Regulus didn’t mean to go further, he really didn’t, but the memory spilled open – vivid and undeniable. He saw Davies’s face, his voice low and intimate, humming that tune as he leaned into her neck, softly kissing it, his fingers brushing Isa’s skin. Inside her head, he felt her longing for his touch, her desire for his fingers to trail further down, to caress every part of her body…

No, *no*. This wasn’t for him – *no*.

Regulus recoiled abruptly, breaking the connection. He lowered his wand, his cheeks flushing as he cleared his throat, guilt building within him. He hadn’t intended to see something so private, so intimate – something clearly meant for Isa and Davies alone. He knew

like no one how it felt to have the most intimate acts and thoughts laid bare. He swallowed.

"I'm – I'm sorry, Ies," he stammered. "I didn't know – didn't want to–"

Isa's face was flushed deep red, her eyes fixed anywhere but on him. "No — it's fine," she managed, a hand to her temple. "I mean… I asked you to, didn't I? I just… didn't think you'd be able to —" She trailed off, biting her lip.

"Well," Regulus nodded, his throat dry. "We now know why your mind is weak, I think."

Isa closed her eyes for a second to regain her composure and then met Regulus's gaze again. "Love."

Regulus nodded. "Love."

She exhaled. " *Fuck* – I'll have to get back to the mind exercises, meditation, blocking out triggers, the whole lot. *Fuck*."

Regulus nodded, eager to move past the awkwardness of having just seen one of her most private moments. "Alright, then," he said, a bit too quickly, "try me – with association this time."

Isa gave him a long look, seeming to regain her focus. "Alright." She raised her wand, taking a deep breath. "Legilimens."

Regulus felt her mind push against his, searching for a way in. She went after memories associated with friendship, lightheartedness. A flicker of colour and sound rose to the surface, something he hadn't expected — just the warm glow of a room, laughter in the background, the warmth of hands – he felt himself back at one of those easy, carefree nights…

He tried to reinforce his defences, shoving the memory down, but it was too late – Isa pressed deeper, and he felt her inch closer to something he kept buried: the faint but nagging pull of desire, a feeling he'd tried to keep locked away under layer upon layer, one he both craved and feared deeply. Then, in a flash of urgency, he severed the connection, gasping slightly as he wrenched himself free.

Isa blinked, looking startled but also triumphant – she had gotten *close*.

Silence fell between them, charged and tentative, as they held each other's gaze. Regulus's grey eyes locked with Isa's warm, contemplative ones. She seemed to hesitate, taken aback by the intensity of what she'd felt.

"Reg?" she asked, her voice soft, yet rising with a question. "Are you — are you…"

Before she could finish, the door swung open, and Ariadna burst in, her face glowing with excitement. "We're having shepherd's pie for dinner!"

Despite the surprise of Ariadna barging in, Isa's face was still fixed on Regulus – but he looked at Isa's little sister pointedly, feeling *very* lucky to be saved from this question.

Because he knew what she was going to ask – she was going to ask whether he fancied someone. He clearly wasn't grieving and probably also hadn't killed someone of late, so there weren't many options left for her to get access to his mind so deeply.

"Are we now?" Regulus asked, forcing a lightness into his tone. "Is it dinner time already?"

"Yes!" Ariadna said cheerfully. "Let's go!"

Regulus threw Isa a quick, questioning look, covering the moment with a small smile, then followed Ariadna out of the room, feeling Isa's hesitant steps behind him.

*****

It was both a blessing and a curse that Isa didn't get the chance to press for details about the question that still lingered in the air; sure, it was good to not have to outwardly lie to his best friend, but well, it came at a rather high price. Perhaps a bit ironically, it even came at the high price of even older, more deeply buried secrets.

That evening, after dinner, Regulus made sure to gather with Isa's sisters in the drawing room again, not eager to be alone with Isa. Sure – Isa hadn't *seen* anything of significance; not like he had in her mind, anyway. But his mind was undoubtedly a bit weaker than it used to be; which also wouldn't have been a problem – he could've played the fatigue card. The real problem lay in the way he had acted; suspicious

and eager to dodge her question.

He winced at his stupidity, but his self-flagmatory thoughts were interrupted by Ariadna.

“Reg?” she asked, batting her lashes at him with a knowing smile. “Will you braid my hair again? *Please*?”

Regulus let out a loud, exaggerated sigh, rolling his eyes in mock exasperation.

“Fine, fine. What’s the request this time?” he asked, feigning reluctance even as he took up Isa’s wand – by now, was a practised routine, as they found themselves in this setup almost every evening.

Ariadna beamed, describing some elaborate braid that no doubt came from her rich imagination. Regulus listened with exaggerated patience, giving little nods and murmuring ‘Oh, of course’ and ‘Naturally’ as if she were imparting sacred knowledge. With an air of utmost seriousness, he began weaving her hair, putting on a show of ridiculous precision and conjuring little sparks of light to float around her like she was some ethereal princess. To be fair, he’d actually gotten rather good at this after all the practice. Isa smirked from her seat, clearly amused by his over-the-top performance.

Regulus was so caught up in his artistry that he didn’t notice the figures standing in the doorway – that is, until the gentle, deliberate pat of a shoe against the floor snapped him back to reality.

He knew it instantly: he winced and looked up, at the sight of a smirking Mr. Nott and – *what the hell* – a positively gleefully beaming Professor Thorne. He froze.

Really, how that man always ended up in the strangest drawing rooms was beyond him.

“Mr. Black,” Thorne grinned, gesturing elegantly toward him, “by all means, continue.”

Of course two of the toughest and most composed wizards he knew had to walk in on him mid-braid.

Isa’s jaw dropped at the sight of her old Hogwarts teacher sharing a smirk with her father, both men clearly relishing the moment.

“P-Professor Thorne?” she stammered, looking between him and her

father. “Is everything… alright?”

Thorne gave her a lopsided smile, eyes glinting with amusement. “Technically, Miss Nott, I’m not your professor anymore. And as for everything being ‘alright’—” his gaze flicked to Regulus, a smirk playing on his lips. “we’re here for Mr. Black.”

“Oh, but Daddy, can’t he finish my braid?” Ariadna pleaded, her big eyes sparkling. “He’s so good at it.”

Professor Thorne chuckled, his tongue poking between his teeth. “Yes, we certainly had the honour of witnessing that, little Miss Nott.”

Mr. Nott raised an eyebrow at the half-finished braid, suppressing a chuckle. “Ah, Regulus has a real talent,” he remarked dryly, glancing sidelong at Thorne, whose grin only widened. “But I’m sure your sister can manage it, Ariadna.”

Regulus, cheeks flushed, quickly rose from the sofa, giving Ariadna’s head a quick pat. “Maybe next time,” he whispered, tossing Isa’s wand back into her lap with a theatrical flourish as he attempted to save face.

He didn’t miss Isa’s bewildered look, her mind likely racing through a thousand questions about why her best friend was heading off with her father and an ex-Professor.

Regulus couldn’t blame her — he knew far more than she did, and he was startled himself. He followed the men to the courtyard, where Mr. Nott, with a flick of his wand, conjured a shimmering bubble that descended over the courtyard, casting a soft, almost iridescent glow around them. The evening sounds of the estate faded, replaced by the hum of silence. Mr. Nott and Thorne casually took seats at a wrought-iron table, gesturing for Regulus to join them. As he settled in, Sable, the Nott family’s house-elf, appeared with drinks – two goblets of mead for the men and a Butterbeer for Regulus, who acknowledged her with a nod of thanks.

“So, Mr. Black,” Thorne began, reclining with a casualness that belied the intensity in his eyes. He extracted a cigar from his coat, which lit automatically at the touch of his lips. Taking a slow, deliberate drag, he studied Regulus through the cloud of smoke. “How have you been?”

Regulus glanced at Thorne’s cigar, wondering if he’d ever understand the appeal of such a filthy habit. “Alright,” he replied cautiously.

“Good.”

Thorne smirked, catching Regulus’s glance but saying nothing as he tilted his chair back. “And been enjoying Syria, I take it?” he continued, a slight hint of amusement in his voice.

“Yes, of course,” Regulus replied, nodding. “Mr. and Mrs. Nott have been very welcoming.”

“Glad to hear it.” Thorne’s eyes glinted as he exchanged a knowing look with Nott, who chuckled, leaning forward.

“Ah, surprised to see Victor here?” Mr. Nott asked, noticing Regulus’s unspoken question. “We’re old friends, Victor and I. And, of course, he’s been eager to discuss your new assignment at Beauxbatons. He thought he’d make the journey and visit in person.”

Regulus sat up straighter, glancing between the two men. New assignment at Beauxbatons – what was this about?

“Beauxbatons,” Thorne continued, his voice shifting to a more serious tone, “isn’t just about learning, is it?” He raised an eyebrow. “We expect you to gauge the school’s political climate and observe where the students’ sympathies might lie. It’s been too long since we’ve had someone on the inside, and that school is too influential to ignore. You’ll be reporting to us every two weeks with your findings.”

Mr. Nott nodded approvingly, his gaze lingering on Regulus with an unmistakable pride. “It’s a key role, Regulus. Only a select few have had the privilege of serving *Him* so early on.” His voice grew reverent, and his eyes glinted with an almost paternal pride. “And I hear He has great plans and speaks very highly of you.”

Regulus couldn’t help but feel a thrill, though he masked it carefully. He knew he was probably the youngest recruit — and definitely the youngest to have met *Him* directly. Few in the revolution had had that privilege yet, even older, more experienced people. Regulus couldn’t really place what the quiet admiration in Mr. Nott’s eyes did, but it was definitely a good feeling.

“Of course,” Regulus replied, keeping his voice steady, “I’ll make sure to provide thorough reports.”

“Excellent,” Thorne said, with a look of satisfaction as he exchanged a glance with Mr. Nott. He smirked. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy Beauxbatons, especially given that they offer *Social & Political Philosophy*.”

Regulus had a very hard time suppressing his excitement at this knowledge.

Thorne chuckled, glancing at Nott. “Told you he’d be thrilled.”

Regulus quickly composed himself.

“And well, you’ll have plenty of chances to report about your findings, as I’ll be the subject’s new teacher.”

Regulus tilted his head. “You – you’re teaching at Beauxbatons next year?”

Thorne smirked and took a dramatically slow draw from his cigar. “It seems, Mr. Black, that we’re going to be… partners of sorts.” He paused. “What a fine team we’ll make, don’t you think?”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, I do.”

Thorne’s grin widened as he took a sip from his mead. “I’ll also be your guide on the *Pure Quill* while you’re there. Naturally, it’s expected that we’ll be introducing a French edition as well. A few subtleties will vary, but on the whole, we expect it to have quite the same effect.”

Regulus frowned, glancing between the two men. “But if I get there, and suddenly the *Pure Quill* appears in circulation, won’t they connect it to me? They’ll know who I am – and it has to stay secret.”

Mr. Nott gave a nod, his eyes gleaming with a hint of approval. “Sharp, Regulus.”

“Indeed,” Thorne added, looking impressed. “They don’t come much sharper than Mr. Black here. But we’ve prepared for this — we’ve already translated the past two issues into French and circulated them on the Beauxbatons grounds. By the time you arrive, it’ll be well-established.”

Regulus nodded. “Alright,” he said, relaxing slightly.

It was there, as he sat back in the chair in the Notts’ courtyard in Damascus, that he connected many dots that he hadn’t been able to trace – let alone connect – before; the meeting with Lucius and Corban in Hogsmeade before the final assignment… So they had deliberately planned that meeting to spill information about the last assignment, they’d wanted to ensure his group had a head start to guarantee their

victory… They definitely knew what the prize was going to be, and they *wanted* him to go to Beauxbatons… That's why Mother had been so intent on him going, even though it could possibly impact his Hogwarts exams… And then, the last meeting with Thorne before the end of term…

"In all seriousness, Mr. Black… I don't often encounter students with your sense of duty — or your… perspective. You're going to go far." He let the words settle, his gaze unwavering. "And I intend to see every step of it. Perhaps not in the classroom, not precisely… though I wouldn't say we're done with those roles just yet."

It had all been arranged — he was meant to win, to go abroad, to be here, right now. They'd orchestrated everything. He swallowed.

Genius.

"Ah, I see the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place?" Thorne smirked, clearly entertained by the growing comprehension on Regulus's face.

Regulus looked up at both men. "Yes… I didn't see it before, but now I do."

"Very good." Thorne gave him an approving nod, then took another draw from his cigar. "And you've got the *Pure Quill* draft ready by tomorrow?"

"Yes," Regulus replied, nodding. "I'll owl it over first thing."

Thorne gave an approving nod.

"Excellent," Mr. Nott noted. "Now, if you'll excuse us, Regulus, your professor and I have a few matters to discuss over a nightcap in the drawing room. I'll see you in the morning."

Regulus excused himself politely, making his way back to the guest room as Thorne and Mr. Nott disappeared through the door leading to the drawing room. The house was quiet, with Isa's sisters already off to bed. He assumed Isa was in her room, likely waiting for Regulus to return so she could attack him with questions.

And indeed, as he closed his door and changed into more comfortable clothes, he heard a soft knock. Turning, he found Isa in her night robe, her expression cautious but her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Regulus managed a faint smile and opened the door wider. “Come in.”

“So, you’re now having secret meetings with *my father* and *Professor Thorne*?” she asked, her expression annoyed but her tone admiring.

Regulus shrugged. “I guess.”

Isa raised her eyebrows. “And *what* was that about?” she pressed.

Regulus sighed, reaching for a book from the small shelf near his bed. He planned to read it once Isa left, but clearly, the girl had other plans.

“You know I can’t talk about it, Ies,” he said, trying to be firm. “He’s ordered—”

He stopped mid-sentence, the words freezing on his tongue. *Shit.* He hadn’t meant to let that slip. *‘He’* could mean anyone, but now – his sudden halt had given it away; now there was only one person it could mean. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Isa’s eyes widened, and she stood up straighter, her tone almost reverent. “*He*? You — you’ve met *Him*?”

Regulus winced, but knew there was no way out – and well, her *father* knew so…

“Yes, I have.”

Isa’s voice dropped to a whisper. “How – how was it?”

He took in her eager expression, her brown eyes wide with awe. “It was… *remarkable*,” he said, struggling to find a word that felt right.

“So, you’re… you’re officially with the revolution now? You’ve joined *Him*?” she asked, still dazed. Regulus didn’t respond, just watched her closely as she took it all in. “And I guess you have some… mission?”

“Look — Ies,” Regulus said carefully. “I can’t talk about it. You know that.”

She sighed, nodding but clearly frustrated. “I know, I know — it’s just… it’s so maddening. I hear snippets, I see glimpses, and I never get the whole story, the whole picture. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to be on the sidelines of something so… monumental?”

Regulus gave her a sympathetic smile. “Honestly, I don’t know much

either. I only get told what's relevant to me; I have no idea what's happening beyond that." He softened, feeling a twinge of guilt. "But really, Ies, you can't breathe a word of this to anyone. No one is supposed to know *anything* about anyone's involvement."

Isa nodded and, to his surprise, let out a small laugh. "Oh, I won't tell anyone," she said with a mischievous smirk. "If word gets out that you've met *Him*, the entire common room will be glued to your arse for the rest of the year."

Regulus caught her mischievous smile and, despite himself, let out a laugh, too.

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The next day, the house was mostly empty – Isa's parents were gone and Ariadna en Elara were off on some day trip with their governor. Regulus had, as promised, owled the new edition of *The Pure Quill* early in the morning, which didn't leave him with much to do.

"So," Isa said, joining Regulus on one of the loungers in the sun in the courtyard – it was already very hot, as one could expect from the Syrian sun in August. An hour from now and they wouldn't be able to stay in the sun without cooling spells. "Shall we continue our project?"

Regulus dropped his head to the left. "Occlumency?"

Isa shrugged. "Yes – we've come so far. I think, perhaps, it's better to keep it theoretical for now…"

Regulus pointedly looked away as he saw a blush creeping upon Isa's face, clearly reminiscing the scene Regulus had witnessed in her memories yesterday.

"I'll have to work on the exercises for a couple of weeks," she continued. "Then I'll be good to go, I think."

Regulus nodded – he was also sure that she'd be alright. A couple of weeks of training her mind and she'd be undoubtedly stronger than she was now.

"Well, let's do it, Nott," he said playfully, eager to go past the awkward topic of Isa's weakened mental defences and, most

importantly, the reason behind it.

So, they returned to the library, where the familiar scent of leather and old parchment greeted them as they stepped into the cool, amber-lit room. The library was poorly organised, so they set to work combing through all the shelves. At some point, Isa took down a leather-bound volume titled *Mental Fortifications and the Mind's Eye*, flipping through its dense pages as Regulus grabbed a stack of other books, piling them between them on the polished wooden table. They decided it'd be better to continue their project in the guest room rather than in the library where Mr. Nott spent much of his free time, so they found themselves locked in the guestroom the entire day, except for the thirty minutes or so they took a break to have lunch in the morning room, and later to have dinner when Mrs. Nott summoned them to the dining room.

After dinner, they tried to sneak off to the guest room as soon as possible without raising suspicion. Some two hours, and a change into their pyjamas in, it was Isa who broke the silence.

"Reg," Isa sighed. She put down *Mental Defences for the Intermediate*. "This is all just… repetition." She gestured at the books they'd spread out over the floor, a clear hint of frustration lacing her voice. "We've gone through nearly every book in the library about Occlumency, and they're all saying the same things as the ones we've studied for the entire week – there's nothing new."

Regulus sighed, rubbing his temples. "Yeah – I know. I think… this is it."

Isa bit her lip, glancing in nothingness, and then looked back at Regulus, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Well… there's the restricted section."

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you say your father would kill you if we went in there?"

Isa waved a dismissive hand, though her eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Oh, whatever. We'll just go quickly. Besides, he'll probably turn a blind eye now that you're having those secret meetings with him."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Ah yes, let's immediately destroy the reputation I've barely built."

"Exactly," she quipped. "And besides, don't you want to see what else

he has in there?"

She had a point – just the thought of going through the restricted sections of the *Notts library*; it was bound to be filled with hidden gems, with extraordinary books on secret topics. The idea spread a thrill through Regulus's body.

"Alright, then."

So, tiptoeing, they made their way to the library, where with a quick glance over her shoulder, Isa lifted the velvet cord and ducked underneath, gesturing for Regulus to follow. He hesitated for only a moment before slipping in behind her, his heart pounding with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

Inside the restricted section, the air felt different — colder, heavier. The towering shelves were packed with ancient, imposing volumes, their spines bearing titles in faded, swirling scripts. Regulus let his fingers trail along the spines as he moved down the aisle, pausing to read the faintly embossed letters on the covers.

"Look at this," Isa breathed, tilting a fragile, worn tome toward him. She opened it carefully, flipping through pages that crackled softly with age. "One of the earliest copies of *Hogwarts: A History*."

Regulus's eyes gleamed with curiosity and he reached to take it from her, but just as he was to grab it, he heard it – the muffled approach of footsteps and the unmistakable murmur of voices. His heart jolted in panic as he recognised the voices – Isa's parents.

Fuck.

In a split second, Isa tugged him into a narrow alcove wedged between towering bookshelves, and quickly casted a *Muffliato* before she pressed herself tightly against him in the awfully small space, hiding them both from sight.

Regulus held still, barely daring to breathe – they could *not* be found. Being found in the forbidden section of the library was already a disaster; although it would've been manageable if Isa hadn't just pulled them in this awfully small space. Being found here with Isa, face-to-face, bodies touching in places Regulus really wished they didn't while she was wearing nothing but a short nightdress – well, that'd be nothing short of a catastrophe.

So, although he normally had much faith in Isa's spellwork and

silencing spells, he now barely dared to breathe. He interlocked gazes with Isa, her face only inches from his, and was sure that he mirrored her pleading, wide eyes – *please don't let them find us.* As he took in her subtle scent, he tried not to focus on the fact that his hands were pinned awkwardly against the shelves, his shoulders nearly brushing Isa's.

The murmur of Isa's parents drifted closer, their words more distinct now as they seemed to settle into a corner, accompanied by the soft creak of a chair. There was a rustle of paper, then Mr. Nott's smooth, cultured voice filtered over to them.

"Ah," he said, a note of amusement in his tone, "looks like they were spotted at the souk last week."

Isa sent Regulus a pointed look – her parents were talking about them. Regulus nodded, sharing that he'd caught on too.

There was a brief, delicate pause, and then the unmistakable sound of Mrs. Nott approaching, likely peering over his shoulder. "It's a lovely photo," she remarked, a touch of satisfaction evident.

"Yes, a fine one," Magnus replied, his tone matter-of-factly. "Our Dora and young Black together — still years from marriage, yet already the only thing people seem to talk about."

Regulus felt his face grow hot at the awkwardness of Isa's parents discussing a supposed wedding between him and Isa — while they hid only a few feet away. And yet, with no escape and no view but that of Isa herself, he had little choice but to face her head-on, awkwardly catching her eye. To his exasperation, she looked positively amused, clearly struggling to contain her laughter at his discomfort.

Then, they heard Mrs. Nott's voice, slightly concerned. "Yes, apparently. Still – don't you think it's a bit premature to entertain ideas of marriage?"

Mr. Nott chuckled, a low sound. "Vivienne, you know your daughter — beautiful, yes, but strong-willed as they come. I'd rather not see her heart led astray by some progressive fool, gallivanting about with notions of modernism."

Now it was Regulus's time to smirk, as Isa looked positively annoyed by her father's remark.

Oh, if Magnus Alaric Nott only knew what Regulus had seen in his

daughter's mind…

Mr. Nott continued with a satisfied air. "Besides, he's from one of the oldest families, highly regarded within revolutionary circles. And they've been friends for years; it's only logical, after all."

Regulus's discomfort returned. None of this was new to him, but hearing it spelled out so clearly, like some grand parental plot, was unsettling. He glanced at Isa again – her earlier amusement had shifted to a mixed expression of anger and embarrassment.

Oddly enough, though, Regulus wished he could return to this feeling of awkwardness once Mrs. Nott opened her mouth to speak.

Her voice dropped, a hint of discomfort threading through her words. "But… are you quite sure, Magnus? With… everything that happened to him…"

Regulus's body tensed instantly, his pulse instantly kicking into an alarming rhythm, breath catching in his throat. The words hung heavy – too familiar and too close. Panic clawed its way up from his chest, his fists clenching at his sides.

No. *No* — they couldn't be talking about that. There was no way they knew…

His eyes flashed with disbelief.

There was no way…

He looked at Isa, since there was literally no other sight to take in with her face almost touching his. The initial fury and embarrassment on her face had faded, replaced with a mix of confusion and growing concern.

Mr. Nott cleared his throat, his tone cautious, as if stepping around something unsettling. "What exactly do you mean?"

Mrs. Nott's hesitation was palpable, her words carefully measured, her voice low. "Well… it was quite the scandal…"

No. The thought pounded in Regulus's mind, insistent and frantic.

They couldn't—

No. No. No.

An impulse struck him – a wild urge to bolt from their hiding place, to face Isa's parents and demand they stop. But he couldn't move. His body felt frozen, rooted to the floor, trapped as he met Isa's puzzled gaze, her brown eyes searching his face for answers he couldn't give. His fists were damp with sweat, his pulse thunderous in his ears, his throat as dry as parchment.

And Isa — Isa couldn't— she couldn't find out — not this way — *no*.

No. No. No.

But he couldn't move. Like always, he couldn't move, he couldn't do anything. Like always, nailed to the ground – nailed to the situation he found himself in. Completely frozen.

He braced himself and felt his stomach turn before Isa's father had even voiced the words.

Mr. Nott sighed, a touch of discomfort edging into his usually smooth voice. "Yes, well — obviously," he said. Regulus closed his eyes, swallowing. He could not face Isa.

And then, then came the words–

"A governor, sharing his bed with the Black boy for years? He was barely older than a toddler when it all began."

Isa inhaled sharply, but Regulus's eyes remained tightly shut. Nailed – nailed to the situation he found himself in. Completely frozen.

No. No. No.

Mrs. Nott's response came, soft and slightly breathy with unease. "But… Magnus… someone who's been through that, for so long… surely he can't be… normal?"

Regulus winced – this, this was it. The essence. It felt like someone had stabbed a knife in his heart, twisting it cruelly for good measure.

He heard Isa's voice in his head, as he had heard during the assignment in the maze.

You're broken, Regulus, you're torn, damaged, defiled.

Even with his eyes closed, he felt the world around him spinning – how he wanted it to continue, to spin and and spin and spin – down and down and down – swallow him whole.

Mr. Nott's voice dropped to a tone Regulus had never heard from him – laced with a cutting disdain. "What do you mean, Vivienne?"

Her voice grew cautious, careful. "I mean… how did he let it go on? It was a matter of years…"

Another stab, another cruel twist. *Why didn't you stop it? Why didn't you tell someone?*

Torn, damaged, defiled.

No. No. No.

Magnus's tone turned condescending, dismissive. "Vivienne, you surely understand — a boy that age doesn't… they can't… find pleasure in something like that." He sighed. "The boy was a pawn, nothing more. Perfectly suited for it, given his mother's neglect. Walburga Black was so intent on perfecting her eldest that she left the younger one entirely forgotten." He paused. "I… I can't imagine what horrors he's suffered."

There was a faint creak of leather as Magnus shifted, folding the paper and placing it back down. Their voices had dropped even lower now, but in the quiet of the library and the void, void feeling in his heart and mind, each word felt sharp and distinct.

Mrs. Nott's tone was laced with curiosity, with an almost morbid fascination. "How did they find out, anyway? After all that time?"

Magnus sighed, his tone thick with scandal and bitter memory. "As I understand it, his cousin uncovered it."

A chill ran down Regulus's spine at her mention, a shudder visibly passing through him as her voice echoed in his mind.

"Look at you — pathetic and lost – I know all of your secrets, Reggie, and I am not afraid to use them – I will use them whenever I see fit – I will use them as I please – because you've been such a naughty boy, haven't you, sweet Reggie?"

Another sigh, and then Mr. Nott continued.

"She's a skilled Occlumens, that one, even at her age back then. Well – needless to say that whatever they found out, nearly drove the entire family to madness. Of course, it was all hushed up immediately – the people that know anything at all mostly only know *something*

happened. Few know the details."

No. No. No.

He had to leave – he couldn't bear it any longer – Isa's racing pulse, her stocked breath against him – why – *why* did she have to find out – why did she have to find out here – this way… He couldn't possibly *breathe* …

Mrs. Nott's voice turned speculative. "Did you… know him? The governor?"

Regulus's stomach turned at the mention of him.

His governor.

Magnus snorted softly, a sound that suggested he'd prefer not to speak of the man. "Not any better than you. I met him once or twice at Black family functions, but that's it. Had a way of vanishing into a room, if you can believe it."

Vivienne's curiosity shifted to something more pressing, a note of confusion mingling with discomfort. "Then… why did they seek *you* out? It seems a… family matter."

"Because they needed someone to find him." Mr. Nott answered, his tone indicating that he considered this more than logical. "And no one else had the resources. The man was deep in hiding, sheltered in the far reaches of Turkey." There was a note of lingering anger, as if the memory itself tasted bitter. "Even for me, it took two years of contacts, of dealing with some *very* unpleasant people, and no small sacrifice. I lost more than a few alliances, valuable connections — had to cross some very old, very wealthy families."

Vivienne sounded taken aback. "But… wasn't he a mudblood?"

Magnus laughed darkly, a low chuckle that echoed through the library. "No – that was the rumour for a while. But no – a pureblood from an old family residing in Turkey… but they were blood traitors through and through. A bit like the Potters here."

He sighed, his tone softening with a desire to leave this dark conversation behind. "Now, Vivienne, let's not linger on such distasteful things. The only way is forward." He cleared his throat, glancing around. "Besides, I still have to gather my notes for the Ministry recommendation…"

Regulus could not open his eyes – even when the sound of the footsteps had long died out, when the sound of the library doors closing wasn't more than a faint echo – he could not open his eyes, he could not move. He was rooted to the spot, every part of him frozen.

Completely frozen. Nailed to the ground.

He could not face her. Couldn't risk seeing her face — not Isa's warm, steady gaze, not the sadness or shock he could feel radiating from her. He could not face her.

"Reg?" Her voice was so soft it could've been just a breath, barely a whisper on the air. "Reg?"

He tried to move – to respond. But he was trapped here, in this small, hidden alcove with her, so close he could feel her breath, hear her pulse — or maybe it was his.

But he would have to open his eyes. He would have to face her if he moved.

"Reg?" She sounded nearly breathless now. "Oh, Reg, I'm so sorry… I am so sorry."

He exhaled, his breath leaving him slowly, burning.

"Let's – let's go – let's go to your room, Reg – just, walk with me, alright? Let's get back to your room…"

Regulus knew very well they had to move; they could hardly stay here, and there was a chance that Isa's father returned once he had found his notes – but it was *so hard* to move. He was paralysed, every nerve locked in place, as though his body had forgotten how to obey.

He had to start with the smallest movement – the smallest movement, yet the hardest one. His eyes.

He opened them slowly, painfully and braced himself.

He let out the breath he had been holding in once he caught Isa's face – stricken, yet tender, her eyes flooded with an emotion he couldn't quite name; compassion, sorrow, anger…

He swallowed, felt her eyes shooting through him, through his essence, right through his soul.

"Can I… can I touch you, Reg?" she asked, her voice laced with

caution, almost a plea.

He flinched, part of him recoiling from the thought.

And so it began. The way she'd look at him differently now. He could see it in her eyes.

Torn. Damaged. Defiled.

He nodded.

She reached for her wrist with one hand. "Oh, Reg – I – I don't know –"

Regulus shook his head. "Don't," he croaked. "Don't."

He couldn't – couldn't take it. The apologetic eyes, the underlying questions, the hidden accusations.

Surely he can't be… normal? – I mean… how did he let it go on? It was a matter of years…

He recoiled at the thought.

"Let's – let's go to your room."

She steadied him with her other hand on his lower back as she gently guided him out of the library.

They walked in silence to his room, Regulus feeling both hollow and overwhelmed. He was gasping, like a fish pulled from water, yet at the same time, it was as though he was drowning — too much rushing over him, one thought after another, too fast to grasp before another one clawed its way in. Stupid, stupid, *stupid* , thinking he could hide it – *oh* but the thought, the thought of them knowing, of them discussing it – his sickest nightmare, his greatest demon, a simple topic of conversation – and they knew – they knew, knew there was something wrong – surely there was something wrong – he should've told, should've screamed – *a matter of years – you've been a naughty boy, haven't you, Reggie?–*

He was so immersed by his thoughts – memories floating through, clawing at the present, the lines blurring…

He hardly took it in when Isa lowered him onto the bed, barely registered the words coming out of her mouth – nothing more than a distant, foreign sound, like whispers through water.

“Reg?” She knelt beside him, voice soft yet intent, grounding him back to the present. He tilted his head to meet her concerned gaze. “Are you with me?”

He nodded. He was here.

“Would it be alright if I stayed? I’ll sleep on a mattress, across the room if you’d prefer, but I… I don’t want you to be alone tonight.”

Torn. Damaged. Defiled.

“Yes.”

Isa nodded, reaching into the nightstand and pulling out a small bag of potions. She took out one vial and placed it on his bedside table, setting the bag down in the bathroom. Once she returned, Regulus had downed the potion already, and was in the process of falling asleep, on top of the duvet.

The last thing he felt was Isa’s hands, gently trying to ease him under the duvet as he slipped away in endlessness, complete and utter nothingness – the Muggle heaven he craved for, he longed for with every vein in his body.

Chapter 3: Of Questions & Bookstores

Luckily, Regulus had to endure only two days of Isa's painfully compassionate stares before he headed back to Grimmauld Place. It had been hard to act normal and composed in front of her parents – he felt naked, exposed, stripped bare of all his dignity. But, in a strange turn of events, the horrible evening prior to Cissy's wedding and his composure the following day had given him strength – if he could survive hundreds of photographers, thousands of eyes after the rehearsal dinner, he could face having a couple of meals with Isa's parents. It had been uneasy, though, and he knew he came across as stiff and detached, but he had been polite and pleasant just as was expected of him.

It had been more difficult to dodge Isa, who looked torn between her eagerness to discuss what she had overheard, her own emotions regarding her parents' statements and the knowledge she had to respect Regulus's boundaries more than ever. The conflict of thoughts and emotions was actually visible on her face.

"Do we – should we – are we going to talk about it?" Isa had asked the morning after.

Regulus had looked at her completely blankly, and had said: "You know all there is to know."

And they had left it at that – but he could tell she was exploding with thoughts and feelings, but he just couldn't deal with it, there was no room left. Every time he thought he could run away from his past, it somehow managed to catch up on him, laughing at him – mocking him.

Even in Syria, in the company of Isa's family, he couldn't escape the demons, the memories clawing at his mind.

Even worse, still – not only had Isa's parents known about his biggest, sickest, most repulsive secret – now, Isa knew as well.

He had managed to hide it from her for so long, and now, in Damascus – of all places in the world – at the *Notts' estate* he had found himself stuck with her in Magnus Nott's restricted library section and *there* the truth had come crashing down. All the lengths he had gone in his life to keep it hidden, all the things he had done to keep it secret, and it had taken nothing more than a foolish project

erected out of boredom and a search for a few books to have the most vulnerable, breakable part of his soul laid bare.

He had no idea how he was going to cope with this – the knowledge that Isa knew, his best friend. Now all the times they were together, he'd be remembered of it, of the shame and the accusations and the pain.

So, it was a relief to escape the Notts in Damascus and return to Grimmauld Place – he could spend his last week before term sifting through all of the emotions, calming down before he'd have to face her again.

Still, he *had* sort of forgotten how uncomfortable the stilted dinners with Mother and Father were, so Regulus was very glad to be invited by Cissy for supper one evening. Lucius was busy with 'matters' – probably for the Revolution – leaving her alone at the estate, meaning it was just the two of them.

Being used to spending the majority of the summer holidays, if not all holidays, together, it felt as if he hadn't seen his cousin properly for ages. Sure, they'd seen each other at meetings, but never in the familiar setting of just the two of them, informally, hanging out and Cissy filling the silence with endless chatter and never-ending questions and genuine interest in his life.

Rather than seating themselves in the dining room, Cissy arranged for the House Elf to serve supper in the garden, away from the formalities of the dining table. It was twilight, and the garden was lush and fragrant, the smell of wildflowers mixing with that of supper. They sat on a blanked spread on the lawn under a blooming arbour, their main dish finished already, and now grazing on cheeses, berries and other fruits.

"So… Hogwarts will be a bit different this year," Cissy noted, lying back to gaze at the deepening sky. "It must be strange, being away from your friends for so long."

Regulus shrugged. "I guess – but I'm curious about Beauxbatons. I tried finding information about the school in our library and the Notts', but there isn't much. Isa's cousins attend the school, of course, but Isa says they're really secretive about it. So… to experience it myself…"

Cissy nodded. "You'll be brilliant. It might suit you even better – I don't know much about the school either, but they're known for their

crafts and their focus on literature. They supposedly offer poetry, magical linguistics, philosophy…" She glanced at Regulus, a smirk tugging at her lips. "And their mascot is an abraxas – you might even put your riding skills to use."

Regulus groaned and gave her a playful shove. "Ha ha, very funny."

"How's Isa taking the thought of missing you?" Cissy continued, a teasing note in her voice.

Regulus shrugged, unable to entirely mask the stiffness. "She'll be alright."

Cissy studied him for a moment, but let it pass. "Who else is going from Hogwarts?"

"There's Khan – a seventh-year Hufflepuff, a first-year Hufflepuff, Coolidge, then the seventh-year Ravenclaw, Thompson – she graduated, so she's not going. And then there's Selwyn – Sabrina…" Regulus hesitated, feeling Cissy's gaze sharpen. He swallowed. "And… well, Potter."

Unbidden, his mind flashed to Potter's eyes, the way he bit his lip, his gasping breath in shudders against his – Regulus swallowed again.

Fortunately, Cissy looked away, her gaze lifting to the sky. "Such a waste," she sighed.

Regulus looked over, puzzled.

"I hear he's incredibly talented," she explained. "Camellia – you know, she works in the Ministry's Department of Magical Education – says he was in the top five for his O.W.L.s."

"Really?" Regulus asked, impressed. Of course he knew that Potter was intelligent, but being the kind of intelligent that word reached the Ministry even, and travelled all the way to the Malfoys' estate… well, that was different.

"Yes, second or third, I think. Your brother was, of course, too."

"Obviously," Regulus replied. Probably without studying much too – everything came naturally to Sirius. He could likely cram for two days and still achieve Outstandings. The only thing he struggled with was following the right ideas.

“But Potter’s name has even come up in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. I’m sure they’ll try to scout him soon. I saw him fly when I watched your match last year and well–” She broke off, probably thinking Potter was a sensitive topic due to Sirius. If only she knew the real reason for his discomfort… “–such a waste. All that talent, all that pure blood – and then, to throw it away…”

“Yeah,” Regulus sighed. “I know.”

He hadn’t thought much about Potter the last couple of weeks — sure, he was in his dreams more often than not, but Regulus had found a way to push the thoughts to the distant corners of his mind, so that when he fully woke, the sensations of his tongue and hands and warm breath felt like a distant idea – a surreal fantasy, rather than a memory igniting an unfathomable amount of desire and heat in his body. Now that Cissy brought him up and all the dreams and memories surged forward, he had to physically shake them off and decided to steer the conversation in another direction. He had some very pressing things he wanted to discuss, but he hadn’t yet mustered the courage and strength, so he decided to go for some smalltalk first.

“So – how’s married life?” he asked, lying down beside her and tossing a grape in the air, catching it neatly between his teeth. Glancing over, he saw Cissy’s warm smile.

“It’s… good. Really good.”

Her smile grew, cheeks tinged faintly pink, as if she were thinking of something specific.

“Do I want to know what you’re thinking about right now?” Regulus asked dryly, although with a teasing edge in his voice.

Cissy rolled her eyes. “Nothing scandalous,” she replied with mock sternness, then softened. “But yes… it’s good. It’s good to love and be loved. Truly loved, not just…”

“For show?” Regulus filled in. It was no secret that most marriages in their world had little to do with love and everything to do with political alliances and preserving pure-blood lineage.

“Yes, I guess,” Cissy nodded. “Although, of course he has been very busy, now that we’ve clearly entered a new phase of the revolution…”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, I’d imagine…”

She turned to him, locking his gaze. “You know – you have no idea how proud I am of you,” she said, her voice tender. “Fifth year, so knowledgeable, the youngest in the Revolution, already taking on missions… your work on *The Pure Quill,* Beauxbatons… I am *so* proud, Reg.”

Her words were soft, warm, and so genuine they went straight to Regulus’s heart. She truly had no idea how much she meant to him – his anchor within the family, always vowing for him, always on his side…

He swallowed.

It was now or never.

He felt the weight of everything he’d been wanting to ask her. He wouldn’t have another chance like this for months; he’d be at Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, and she was married now, so they rarely saw each other alone… So it *truly* was now or never. So many questions in his head for years, and now, after his stay at the Notts – new ones, and old ones that had sharpened…

He swallowed again, his throat drier than parchment.

“Cissy?” he asked, his voice barely audible. He looked up at the sky but sensed the shift in the air and knew she felt it too. “Who–” he closed his eyes, hesitating, caught between an intense need to know and the fear that perhaps it was better not to, “–who knows?”

He didn’t elaborate – he knew he didn’t need to. He knew the question caught her off guard; they rarely spoke of it, and when they did, it was only out of absolute necessity, always initiated by her.

Still, she didn’t let her surprise show, and instead remained composed, looking at the sky too. It was nearly dark now and slowly, stars were popping up in the sky.

“I’m not … entirely sure,” she said slowly. “Our parents, of course… Uncle Alphard… Bella…”

Regulus winced at the name.

“And of course, Lucius knows,” she continued, her voice subdued. “And…”

“Isa’s parents,” he finished, his voice barely a whisper.

She turned to him, concern in her gaze. “Did… something happen in Syria?”

He kept his eyes on the sky, slightly shaking his head. “Has – has Lucius told anyone?”

Cissy’s voice grew firm. “No. He hasn’t, and he won’t.”

Regulus believed her. But he felt his stomach twist at the next question.

“Has… Bella told anyone?”

Cissy sighed, her reluctance palpable. “I – I don’t know, Reg.”

He flinched.

“I’ve done everything I could,” Cissy continued, her voice thick with emotion. “I knew how important it was to you, if she could just keep it to herself – or at least from Rodolphus, the only one she’d tell. We nearly made an Unbreakable Vow.”

This got Regulus’s attention more than ever — he snapped his face towards her.

“But Mum wasn’t having it,” Cissy sighed. “Even though it was just, you know, for her not to tell Rodolphus… but I think Mum was afraid.”

Regulus didn’t ask her why — his throat felt so dry he was sure it couldn’t pass any sound whatsoever. Luckily, she continued and answered the question herself.

“If we’d made an Unbreakable Vow not to tell Rodolphus… well, you know how tricky and vague that kind of magic is. What does ‘telling’ even mean? What if he were to probe her mind and find out? Would that be ‘telling’? And you know Bella is very much into experimental magic…”

Regulus managed a snort. There was probably not a sick dark magic experiment that Bellatrix hadn’t tried.

“So Mum didn’t want to risk it.”

The silence between them stretched, which granted Regulus the opportunity to ask the next question – one whose answer he had always dreaded, dreaded from the moment that the ball went rolling.

His voice was hoarse, barely audible, and he physically cowered as he asked the question. “Has – has she – told you? Told you wh – what she saw?”

He looked at her from the corner of his eyes and saw her swallow. It was very simple, actually – it was either *yes*, she had told her everything or *no,* she hadn’t. He had already mentally prepared himself for the first scenario – knew it was the most likely answer. It couldn’t be worse than that – couldn’t be worse than *yes*, she had told her everything.

“Do you want the truth, Reg?” Cissy asked, whispering, her blue eyes locking with his.

Yes, actually, he really did want to know. It couldn’t be worse than – *yes*, she had told her everything.

Cissy swallowed again, then tore her gaze away from his and returned it to the nightsky.

And then Regulus realised it *could* be worse.

“She showed me. In a pensieve.”

Regulus’s breath stopped and he closed his eyes in shame.

She hadn’t *heard* about it. She had *seen* it.

“Look,” Cissy continued instantly, “I – I didn’t know what she was going to show before I got into the pensieve, otherwise I wouldn’t – I wouldn’t have entered. And once I got … the gist… I retreated – I didn’t see much, I…” her voice trailed off.

Regulus nodded, his eyes still closed, a heavy lump forming in his throat.

She had *seen* it. She had *seen* it.

“I’m sorry, Reg,” she said, her voice high and full of emotion. “I know you probably hate me now – I – I’m sorry.”

Regulus opened his eyes and looked at her, shaking his head slowly. “I don’t hate you.”

How could he hate her? He hated himself, yes, for all that he had allowed to happen – but he couldn’t ever hate Cissy. Impossible. She had always vowed for him; had always understood what he wanted;

had even tried to get her sister to make an Unbreakable Vow…

"Isa knows," he admitted, his voice rough.

Cissy looked at him thoughtfully. "So something *did* happen in Syria."

Regulus shrugged. "We – we – overheard her parents… discussing it."

Cissy winced. "Merlin," she whispered. "That – that's… terrible. How did Isa react?"

"I … don't really know yet," Regulus admitted slowly, looking back at the sky.

"Well," Cissy said, her voice stronger, "I know Isa loves you. The way she fusses over you, asks about you… Even if it's bad, it's only because the news needs time to … you know … settle."

Although none of the information that'd come to light had eased any of his concerns or shame, Regulus somehow found the courage to steer the conversation in the last undiscussed matter that was very pressing, but also very frightening.

"Who was involved?" he asked, his voice stronger than he felt. "This summer… who was involved?"

Cissy took him in with a worried gaze, then sighed in defeat – probably knowing that she really couldn't lie about this. "Well, Magnus Nott managed to find him with some help – I'm sure that these contacts didn't know *why* they went after him, only helped to – and in the…" she took a couple of second to find the idiom for the scene captured by the macabre photograph " *matter* … well that was Magnus, Lucius and…"

"Bella," Regulus nodded. "She was there."

Cissy nodded, her eyes closed. "I – I tried to stop it – I know you wouldn't want her there – but I had no say in the matter."

Regulus exhaled shakily, swallowing hard, hoping the tightness in his throat and the burning in his eyes would ease.

"Are you – are you… alright, Reg?" Cissy asked silently. "I mean – in general… with all this."

He nodded – it was an outright lie, but he nodded anyway. "Yeah," he croaked. "I'm alright."

*****

The last weekend before the start of term, Regulus decided to venture into Muggle London for a final bookstore visit. He had roamed the many bookstores the city offered – from obscure, dusty shops wedged between buildings to the commercial ones that lined the mainstraits – all of them; and today he decided to go to Foyles – a sprawling, well-known bookstore on Charing Cross Road. He'd always preferred the smaller, lesser-known places for their hidden gems, the kinds of books that hadn't seen sunlight in years, but today he wanted selection over serendipity. Foyles had plenty, and it was popular and known for its crowds.

Late that morning, he slipped out of Grimmauld Place, careful to wait until both Mother and Father had left. Now, technically – he wasn't forbidden from visiting Muggle London, but it was frowned upon, and with Sirius already off the rails it wouldn't sit well with Mother to see her youngest son striding out in muggle jeans and a long-sleeve. Apart from his visit to Cissy's and a short visit from Lucius to Grimmauld Place – to deliver more details about his mission at Beauxbatons – the only company he'd had was Mother, Father and Kreacher; so he could really use a change of scenery and people, even if they were Muggles.

As he walked, his thoughts ran in loops – chaotic but oddly grounding. He wondered about Beauxbatons, if they had Houses just like at Hogwarts, where he'd sleep, what the school looked like… He wondered about his friends, what they'd been up to during the holidays, whether Barty had been around his Dad much or just stuck with his Mum… He wondered what Sirius had been up to – he was staying at the Potters for sure… did they have some estate somewhere they'd gone off to, or had they stayed at Potter Manor? He sighed at the thought of Potter.

Well, one very hopeful realisation had come from the holidays – the realisation that distance *did* change matters. He wasn't an idiot and knew that the dreams weren't normal, nor the feelings evoked if he really reminisced about their last encounters, but he realised the sharp edges were gone, and the longer he thought about it – the more rational he became, reminding himself that it wasn't allowed to exist, couldn't happen, wouldn't be… And sure, they'd go to Beauxbatons together, but they were in different years, so they didn't have to mingle – and their participation in the Unity Project was over now, so they wouldn't have to see much of each other… It would be alright. It would be alright. Definitely.

Regulus was still convincing himself of this when Foyles' large, slightly faded sign appeared around the corner. The bookstore towered over the street, its rows of windows showing glimpses of shelves upon shelves of books. Stepping closer, he took in the grand entrance, where floor-to-ceiling displays showcased titles from every genre. He moved toward the door, his gaze trailing over the shop's name, feeling that strange thrill — a mix of trepidation and excitement that always struck him when he entered muggle bookstores.

He had barely taken a few steps inside when a bright, delighted shriek cut through the bookstore's quiet hum.

"Oh my god — there you are! I was *positive* you'd died!"

Turning, he found himself face-to-face with a very broad smile and a pair of laughing, green eyes – Anne-Marie. Having visited two times a year the last couple of years, they had actually become quite acquainted with each other. She'd be twenty-ish now, in Muggle university and she was very clever – knew a lot about philosophy and history and always managed to surprise Regulus with a challenging book.

Regulus grinned. "Nah – I haven't been in London for a long time."

"Well, I'm glad to see you're not a ghost!" She laughed, then gestured towards a comfortable-looking chesterfield armchair nestled in a quieter corner by the philosophy and literature section. "Come on, sit — you look like you could use it."

He made his way over to the chair, sinking into the worn, supple leather a little bit awkwardly. Anne-Marie vanished into the back of the store for a moment, reappearing a few minutes later with a steaming cup of coffee. She handed it to him with a grin, perching herself on the edge of the chair opposite him.

"So," she said, crossing her legs and leaning forward, "catch me up. What have you been reading? And how's boarding school? Surviving?"

So they talked. He told her about the works he'd been reading – Nietzsche, Hegel, Machiavelli, Sun Tzu… And she told him about her life at university, her friends, the subjects she was studying. Time slipped by faster than he realised, and eventually, Anne-Marie's coworker appeared, pointedly summoning her back to work. Regulus accepted this with a sigh and drifted into the politics section, flipping

through a few books, when a very, *very* familiar voice broke his reverie.

“Well, *no bloody way* – what are the odds?”

Regulus whipped around, heart leaping into his throat. And there he was – looking *very* handsome in Muggle clothes and somehow *completely* out of place – James bloody Potter.

“What the *hell* are you doing here?” Regulus asked, completely caught off guard, the book in his hand dropping to the floor with a dull thud.

“I could ask you the same question, you know,” Potter replied, his eyebrows raised but his eyes glinting with mischief. Regulus tried to ignore the way his gut twisted at Potter’s smirk and sparkling eyes. And of course, Potter also had the Gryffindor decency to stoop down, pick up the book, and hand it back with that irritatingly charming smile. “I’m here with Sirius, actually.”

Of course he was – Sirius had accompanied him once or twice to this part of London.

“Then – where is my brother?” Regulus asked warily, glancing around the store.

“He went after a couple of girls going to a record shop down the street – probably snogging one of them by now.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, slotting the book back on the shelf. “And you’re not joining him because?”

Potter hesitated for a beat, his eyes flickering with a hint of introspection. “No… I’ve come to realise I prefer to snog when I’m pinned against a wall in Hogwarts’ antechamber.”

Regulus’s mind flashed instantly to that evening – Potter pressed against the cold stone wall, his hands gripping Regulus’s neck, the sounds that had vibrated against his lips. His face must have betrayed something, because Potter’s expression grew more amused.

Regulus shot him an annoyed look. Bringing it up here – so casually, so matter-of-factly…

“Is this a joke to you?” he snapped.

Potter met his gaze, unfazed, a small, maddeningly confident smile

tugging at his lips. “Oh no, Black. I’m *very* serious about this.”

They locked eyes, each gaze challenging the other until Regulus broke away, turning back to the bookshelves, determined to ignore the heat simmering in his chest. Potter, meanwhile, seemed to miraculously realise where he was and with whom.

“You – *you* visit Muggle bookstores and read their books?” he asked, not even trying to hide his amusement. Regulus turned around and rolled his eyes at his mischievous, laughing face.

“So what?” Regulus asked sharply. “I like to read.”

“Muggle books?” Potter chuckled, letting out a bark of laughter. “Regulus Black — roaming *Muggle* bookstores.”

“Yes, ha ha, hilarious,” Regulus shot. Then he realised the implications of Potter’s presence. “Don’t – don’t tell anyone,” he continued, glancing around the store, lowering his voice.

Potter leaned back against a bookcase, crossing his legs and regarding Regulus with the signature move that made Regulus swallow – twinkling eyes, eyebrows slightly raised, lip caught between his teeth. Regulus felt a pang of something that was both irritating and magnetic.

“No worries, Black,” Potter smirked. “I’ll add it to the list. But now that we share so many secrets – can I *finally* call you Regulus?”

Regulus gave an incredulous snort. “No, Potter. You still can’t.”

Potter sighed dramatically, though the glint in his eyes showed just how much he was enjoying this exchange. “Alright, I’ll be patient.”

Just as Regulus rolled his eyes – very much doubting that Potter would ever earn the privilege – Anne-Marie appeared, draping an arm around his shoulder amicably.

“Oh,” she said, eyes raking over Potter with clear interest, her voice breaking into a charming smile. *Of course* Potter managed to impress Muggles four years his senior.

Potter raised an eyebrow, giving her an appraising look.

“I didn’t know you’d brought someone, Reg,” she said, smiling as her emerald eyes sparkled with mischief.

Potter turned to Regulus with a smirk. “But *she* can call you by your name?”

Unfazed, Anne-Marie laughed. “Of course. Regibald and I have known each other for years.”

Regulus felt his face flush, heat flooding through his cheeks.

“*Regibald*?” Potter repeated, barely containing his laughter.

Regulus decided to intervene before it could escalate, and grabbed a book by Thomas Hobbes. “Do you have any more of his work in the back?”

Anne-Marie raised an eyebrow but smiled. “Sure, Reg, I’ll be right back.”

The moment she was gone, Potter couldn’t hold back any longer. He burst into laughter.

“*Regibald*?”

“What?” Regulus huffed, folding his arms defensively. “Could hardly give a Muggle my real name, could I? I stumbled… and it just… came out.”

Potter bit his lip, trying to stifle his grin in that infuriatingly charming way and Regulus felt an annoying thrill run down his spine.

Potter smirked. “Yes – you couldn’t have gone with something like *Regan*, of course.”

Regulus froze, then groaned as realisation dawned on him. “Oh… *fuck*.”

Potter laughed.

“So — Regibald,” he teased, savouring every syllable. Regulus shot him a venomous glare. “Alright, Black,” Potter continued, leaning easily against the bookshelf as his smirk softened. “You looking forward to Beauxbatons?”

Regulus shrugged, trailing his fingers absently along the spines of the books, letting the question linger. “I guess. You?”

“I guess.” Potter echoed, shifting his weight slightly as he watched Regulus. “You know it’s just the three of us going, right? You, me, and

Khan."

Regulus turned, surprised. "Just three? Why?"

Potter shrugged, casually trailing after Regulus through the shelves, his posture easy, his gaze warm. "Gregor wrote—"

"*Wrote*?" Regulus interrupted. "You're pen pals with Coolidge now?"

Potter's smirk deepened. "Jealous, Black?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Potter let out a short laugh. "Well, anyway, we exchanged an owl or two over the break. Gregor's worried he won't keep up with Hogwarts' subjects, though I think his parents aren't thrilled about him going in the first place. They're Muggles, you know." Potter hesitated as if he were treading into sensitive territory. Which was stupid, because Regulus knew Coolidge was a Mudblood. And well – they were in a Muggle bookstore, where Regulus had just been embraced by a *Muggle* so surely Potter knew better than this?

"And Selwyn? What's her excuse?" Regulus asked, rolling his eyes.

Potter's eyes twinkled. "Oh, Selwyn's all stressed about her O.W.L.s. But, well…"

Regulus knew where he was going with this and finished the sentence for him. "It probably won't make much of a difference."

Potter laughed, a genuine, hearty sound. "Exactly. She might as well go to France and take it easy."

Regulus glanced at Potter, who was still standing by the bookshelf, arms folded in a way that looked both relaxed and magnetic. Regulus felt his pulse quicken despite himself.

"How are you going to manage it, though?" Regulus asked.

Potter frowned, perplexed. "Manage what?"

"The Captaincy and Beauxbatons."

For once, Potter looked genuinely taken aback. "Who told you I'm Captain?"

Regulus rolled his eyes and sighed. "Could it really have been anyone

else?”

A small, genuine smile spread across Potter’s face, his eyes appreciative and kind. Regulus’s heart pounded, a fluttering ache that made him want to look away — but he didn’t. He let the tension settle between them, even as he shifted his gaze, fingers tracing the spines of books on the shelf to ground himself.

“I’ll manage,” Potter finally answered, clearing his throat. “They’re letting me Floo back and forth for training.”

Regulus snorted. They must’ve been desperate to name him Captain if they were bending rules like that.

Potter seemed to read his mind. “Clearly, McGonagall *really* wants us to win the Cup.”

Regulus nodded, and as the silence stretched between them, Potter coughed again. “I’d better go,” he said, glancing toward the shop doors. Walking backward, hands in his pockets and that signature smirk on his face, he added, “See you Monday at Hogwarts.”

With that, he turned on his heel and exited the bookstore.

“Well, well,” Anne-Marie said, reappearing from the back with a stack of books, her gaze following Potter’s exit. “A real looker, isn’t he?”

Regulus rolled his eyes.

Chapter 4: Of Awkward & Try-outs

Regulus was glad to go back to Hogwarts – he was positive he'd die if he had to sit through another dinner with Mother and Father alone, and he felt a thrill at the idea of the coming year – it was time to take his role in the Revolution to a new level, and he was *ready* for it. He was glad that things were finally evolving, and that he was granted the chance to play a pivotal role in it.

He was so eager to get going that he arrived half an hour early at the station, and decided to kill time by reading a book in their usual compartment. He was looking forward to seeing Evan and Barty – he hadn't seen them all summer and so much had happened that he knew they would be eager to discuss. He was less looking forward to seeing Isa, though – their goodbye had been awkward and stiff, and Regulus still hadn't been able to mentally process the fact that she knew about his deepest secret, and therefore had no clue how to behave with her around. It'd be especially bad if wore the same set of apologetic and empathic eyes as she'd done his last days in Damascus; he truly hoped that their antics would return to normal, like nothing had happened, but he knew himself and Isa well enough to know that was a stupid thought.

The compartment door suddenly flew open with a loud bang, jolting him from his thoughts. "Black!" Evan roared with a wide grin. "There you are!"

Regulus barely had time to process the interruption before Evan strode over, clapping him on the shoulder before collapsing into the seat beside him. His presence was magnetic, filling the room with a contagious energy. Barty followed close behind, grinning from ear to ear and sprawling on the bench across from them, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Ah, I've missed you, Black," Barty said with a dramatic sigh. "I've missed your L-O-V-E."

Regulus was in too good a mood to bother with a snide response and instead laughed just as Severus, Avery, and Mulciber entered the compartment. Soon, the space was buzzing with chaotic energy — everyone talking about their summers, pranks they wanted to pull, parties they planned to throw.

"So, you want to chip in on a theme for the party, Black?" Avery

asked.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “Err — why?”

“It’s a goodbye party for you, mate,” Evan explained with a smirk.

“Yes — he’s off to have fun with French girls and gets a party,” Mulciber added with mock derision. “Still, we do like an excuse to throw one.”

“You’re throwing me a goodbye party?” Regulus asked, a mix of exasperation and amusement.

“Of course we are,” Barty drawled with a confident smirk. “We should get to have *some* fun from the fact you’re off charming Beauxbatons witches.”

“Yes,” Evan nodded, “and we can make it a bit of a party for you too, Crouch – celebrating the fact that you’ve become Prefect.”

At once, the compartment fell utterly silent.

Regulus blinked, suddenly struck by the realisation that it indeed *was* their fifth year.

What? Barty a Prefect?

“*You’re* a Prefect?” Regulus finally managed, disbelief laced in his voice. *Barty* — the rulebreaker, the prankster, the boy who barely cared about school or grades and who seemed to live for jinxing as many Gryffindors as possible.

Mulciber seemed to share this thought and snorted. “You’re joking, right? Who in their right mind decided *that*? I always thought it’d be Black.”

This wasn’t a weird assumption – Regulus was much more composed, earned top marks. But then again, he was off to Beauxbatons part of this year so he wouldn’t be of much use until Christmas anyway.

Barty, utterly unbothered, leaned back with an insufferable smirk. “Clearly Dumbledore has some sense after all.”

“Yes, it’s brilliant,” Avery cut in, eyes gleaming with sudden enthusiasm. “Think about it — *we* have a Prefect on our side. No one’s going to see that coming.”

Regulus exchanged a glance with Mulciber, his skepticism far from resolved, but well – who cared anyway. It was good to have a Prefect vouching for them if necessary, and perhaps it'd force Barty to care for more than the next party.

Shrugging off thoughts about the Prefect position, Regulus leaned back and let himself enjoy the ride to Hogwarts; he half-listened to his friends' banter and jokes while reading Leviathan by Hobbes – he had come across his name a couple of times but hadn't come across his work until the previous week in London and he was totally immersed by it. He hadn't had much time to read besides the course work for Hogwarts – the most of which he had read over the holidays to have a head start now that he'd miss much due to Beauxbatons – and the books he and Isa had consulted in their Occlumency Project.

The only less pleasant notion was the arrival of Isa, Melania and Amaryllis – for more reasons than he'd anticipated.

The first one to enter the compartment was Melania – looking flustered and awkward. This struck Regulus as a bit weird; sure, it was probably a bit intimidating entering a compartment full of blokes, but well, they were all rather acquainted with each other and she was dating Evan…

"Hi, guys," she said, shifting uncomfortably. Everyone greeted her, but Regulus noticed the pained look on Barty's face and Evan's cold, disinterested stare.

Melania turned to Evan and handed him a small package, which he accepted with a blank expression. "You left this," she clarified.

Without another word, she turned on her heel and left the compartment.

Regulus raised his eyebrows. "Evan?" he asked. "What's got her wand in a — *ouch*!" His question was cut off by a sharp kick from Barty in his shin, just as Isa appeared in the doorway.

"Hi, everyone," she said, casting a brief, cautious glance around, her gaze lingering on Barty and Evan. The group murmured greetings and nodded.

Then her gaze drifted toward Regulus, and he felt himself tense reflexively — a reaction he *truly* wished he could control. He saw a similar flicker of tension on Isa's face as their eyes met.

“Reg,” she said, her lips tugging into a small, tense smile.

“Isa,” he replied, not unkind but too stiff to go unnoticed by the others.

She turned abruptly and disappeared down the corridor after Amaryllis.

Regulus pointedly returned to his book but literally felt the stares of the other blokes in the compartment.

“What was *that* about?” Evan asked, raising an eyebrow as he glanced between Regulus and the doorway. Regulus shot a pointed look at Barty — *Evan* was allowed to pry, but he wasn’t?

Regulus shrugged and feigned innocence. “What?”

“You guys–” Barty asked, looking around awkwardly as if looking for confirmation that this exchange indeed had been weird.

Mulciber smirked, cutting straight to the point. “You two not seeing each other anymore then, or what?”

Regulus paused, then shrugged, deciding to just face it head-on. “No. We’re not together,” he said simply, surprising himself with the ease of his response and then returned to his book.

Barty and Evan exchanged wide-eyed looks, while Severus, looking vaguely uncomfortable, shifted in his seat. There was a pause before Severus smoothly redirected the conversation. “So — what’s the latest on the revolution?”

“About time someone went to lead it,” Mulciber said, grinning. “The Dark Lord — best title they could’ve given him.”

“They say he’s building an army,” Avery added, leaning in with a conspiratorial gleam in his eye. “Word is, he’ll topple the Ministry any day now.”

Regulus glanced up from his book, observing his friends’ eager expressions, trying to gauge exactly what they understood and what they had missed.

The Revolution *had* entered a new phase now that, at least in traditional circles, the Dark Lord had stepped out of the shadows. The Ministry had grown even more repressive, so he’d found fertile ground

for dissent and had finally chosen the moment to seize it. There were strict crackdowns by the progressives on dissenters and Knockturn Alley had been brutally raided multiple times as the Ministry rooted out supposed ‘subversives’ and ‘sympathisers’.

On top of this, there were new laws underway in the Wizengamot, granting Ministry officials unprecedented power to investigate and search the homes of ‘suspicious families’ – just a pretext for targeting anyone with revolutionary sympathies, of course. This had actually backfired, alienating many previously neutral or apolitical figures and pushing them into the revolutionary camp. Uncle Alphard, for example, couldn’t give a rat’s arse about whether the Ministry was led by progressive crooks or traditionalists, as long as no one endangered his winged horses, his illegal brewed liquors and his precious collection of enchanted musical artefacts, many of which acquired from dubious colonial sources. The endangering of his beloved hobbies, however, had almost made an activist out of him.

At the same time, Minchum’s administration, prioritising ‘national security’, had slashed economic support, funnelling funds into aggressive ‘security measures’ – ordinary people felt the pinch, and with the strain of a faltering economy, dissatisfaction was growing. The tension was palpable in places like Diagon Alley, where incidents between pro- and anti-revolutionary groups were becoming common. There had even been a widely covered duelling incident in the Ministry lobby.

It was clear that the Dark Lord had chosen his timing well; growing fear and discontent had primed people for something different, someone bold enough to say what others only whispered. More and more were joining his ranks — but discreetly, in quiet, closed circles. They feared being shunned or targeted by the Ministry, but Regulus knew the revolutionary spirit was building momentum. It wasn’t a matter of if, but *when* the Dark Lord would amass enough support for all the revolutionaries to step out openly.

Regulus felt particularly for Barty – he’d probably had a very shitty summer with his father who had been hailed the hero of the progressive crackdown and the right hand to Minchum. He wondered how much Barty’s father knew about Barty’s support for the Revolution.

The boys soon launched into an animated discussion of spells they wanted to try on Gryffindors, new tricks for evading Filch, and the upcoming season’s Quidditch prospects. Regulus tuned them out,

burying himself back in his book. But after a few moments, Evan leaned over and spoke in a low voice.

“So — you’re in?”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, uncertain. “What?”

“We had a spontaneous get-together at my place over the summer. I was just with Barty, then Mulciber and Avery showed up — and then Lestrange and Dolohov dropped by. We wanted to ask you, too, but Lestrange said you were… in a meeting.”

Regulus didn’t change his expression, but his mind sharpened. “Lestrange said I was in a meeting?”

“Yeah — well, he was a bit plastered at the time, mentioned it after, you know, we’d all had a few.”

Regulus didn’t answer – he couldn’t; his involvement was a secret, and he didn’t trust all of the people in the comportant to be discrete enough.

Evan nodded slowly, understanding Regulus’s silence, and then returned to the conversation. Regulus returned to his book, not missing the piercing eyes from Severus on him.

*****

The tense political climate outside the castle was very palpable inside Hogwarts as well — the situation reminded Regulus a bit of the time when Minchum was installed; people in general steered clear of the Slytherins and moved in small, wary groups. This time, however, it was even worse; students either treated the castle as their own battleground, while others used it as a place to unleash their suppressed frustrations. The first group, mostly Gryffindors, seemed intent on making it their mission to hex as many Slytherins as possible, with Sirius and Potter leading the charge. The second group mostly included Regulus’s friends: Barty, venting his grievances against his father; Evan, nursing his broken heart after apparently Melania left him over the holidays when she’d met a group of Italian wizards with Amaryllis. Add in Mulciber and Avery — always eager to test out new jinxes — and Severus, with his renewed hatred for Sirius, Potter, and their friends, and a simple walk through the castle felt as dangerous as navigating a Muggle minefield.

It felt strange being at Hogwarts, knowing he’d be somewhere else

entirely in just a week. Sitting through classes seemed pointless, since they were all introductory, and he'd be gone before they really delved into O.W.L. material. Still, he much preferred being around his friends over staying at home — and, since Beauxbatons started later than Hogwarts, it was the better option anyway. It was even better, perhaps, now that Dolohov and Lestrange had graduated; Regulus and his friends had claimed the best corner in the common room.

Apparently, even though they weren't the eldest years, their group had somehow become the popular group of blokes among the Slytherins. Not that Regulus cared — he was mostly oblivious to it anyway — but it came with certain perks. People tended to clear a path for them in the hallways, and they had their pick of the best seats in the common room, the Slytherin table, and even the library. Few dared to occupy the favoured study corner, for fear that Regulus might come along and take it back.

The downside, however, was that combined with rumours he and Isa might have broken up, Regulus found himself dodging far too many girls for his liking in just the first week.

On Wednesday, Regulus was walking with Barty and Evan from Transfiguration to the grounds — the weather was warm and sunny — when yet another girl cornered him.

"Hi, Regulus," she said. She had dark hair pulled into a bun, piercing blue eyes, and was probably considered quite pretty. Two other girls trailed behind her, leaving Barty and Evan to hang back as well, while Regulus, who had no idea who this girl was, stood there awkwardly. Her tie showed she was a Slytherin, but that was about all he could gather.

"Hi," he replied, a bit stiff and clearly uncomfortable. A silence followed. "Err — can I help you with something?"

He heard Barty and Evan sniggering behind him, which only made matters worse, but he chose to ignore it.

"I hear there's a party on Saturday," she continued, her voice a bit shy.

Silence.

"You've heard correctly," Regulus replied, realising too late how flat that sounded.

Another pause.

“Are you going with someone?” she asked, looking up at him hopefully.

Regulus scratched his head awkwardly. Of course he was going with people — his friends were organising it, so he’d be there with them. But before he could answer, Barty stepped in with a smirk.

“He’s not,” he said, grinning. “What about you?”

The girl seemed momentarily taken aback by Barty’s sudden involvement but shook her head.

“Well, look at that!” Evan chimed in, enjoying Regulus’s discomfort. “Regulus here would *love* to go with you, wouldn’t he?”

Regulus spun around to glare at his friends, wide-eyed, but Barty elbowed him sharply, forcing him back to face the girl.

“Er — yes, sure,” he mumbled, sighing as he met her pleading eyes. *How bloody embarrassing* – he could hardly turn her down now, could he?

“Alright,” the girl said, face breaking into a wide smile. Truth to be told, she looked kind — different from most of the Slytherin girls — but he didn’t really see the point in going with her. Besides, she surely knew the party was organised because he was *leaving* , so what was the point of going together and getting to know each other if they wouldn’t see each other for months? The girl turned on her heels with another dashing smile before she walked away with her friends.

“Thank Merlin you’ve got the looks, mate,” Evan said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Because, honestly, the conversation skills… disappointing.”

“Oh, piss off, Evan,” Regulus shot back, annoyed. “Who is she, anyway?”

Evan and Barty exchanged looks and laughed, shaking their heads in disbelief. “Have you been living under a rock, mate?”

Regulus didn’t bother answering, only raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“That’s Eira Warrington — arguably the hottest sixth-year at

Hogwarts."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Some standards Hogwarts has." Not that she wasn't pretty, but really, who bloody cared?

"Yes, yes, we know," Barty said, sounding exasperated. "The bar's impossibly high after Nott — we get it — but you can't keep *dwelling on her* forever, you know."

Regulus arched an eyebrow. There was nothing to dwell on; he hadn't been with Isa in the first place and even if he had, according to the rumour they were broken up for a month tops, so it was hardly what he'd call 'dwelling'.

Just then, they passed a group of fourth-year Gryffindors. One of them discreetly aimed his wand at Barty and muttered a hex under his breath. Regulus's reaction came instinctively and instantly – flicking his wand up and casting a non-verbal shield that deflected the hex effortlessly. Hexing *Barty* in the corridors with his friends in tow – you'd have to be a special kind of stupid for that. The Gryffindor looked stunned, and Barty's eyes flashed with anger as he started to raise his wand.

"Barty," Regulus interrupted, holding up a hand and gesturing pointedly to the Prefect badge pinned to Barty's robes. "Let's go."

Barty glowered but lowered his wand, while Regulus turned to the Gryffindor. He met the younger boy's gaze coolly.

"You really think it's wise to jinx us?" he said, voice low and almost dangerous. "I'll let it slide today. Try it again, though, and we'll see if you can so much as mutter a *protego* afterward."

The fourth-years exchanged nervous glances before backing away, clearly deciding it was best not to push their luck.

Just then, Lupin and Potter appeared, having witnessed the exchange. It was the first time Regulus saw Potter up close since their encounter in Muggle London – he looked handsome as ever, but, at this particular moment, also clearly uncomfortable being in Regulus's presence with the current audience. Lupin raised an eyebrow, eyeing Barty's Prefect badge with much dismay.

"Is there a problem here?" Lupin asked, gaze shifting from Barty to Regulus, his tone carefully neutral.

Barty tensed, clearly ready to take on the two Gryffindors, but Regulus placed a steady hand on his shoulder, giving him a pointed look.

“Come on,” Regulus said calmly, guiding Barty and Evan toward the doors that led outside. As he walked past the two Gryffindors, he gave Lupin a nod. “Lupin.” Then he turned his gaze to Potter, his expression cool, though his eyes lingered a fraction longer. “Potter.”

He saw a flicker in Potter’s brown eyes — something intense and charged, especially when Regulus’s eyes carefully trailed to Potter’s lips. Regulus held Potter’s gaze for a heartbeat longer than necessary before turning to follow his friends outside.

*****

Considering the tension between especially Slytherin and Gryffindor and the amount of hexes flying between the respective houses’ students, Potter’s next move regarding Regulus was a very bold — and in Regulus’s opinion, unnecessarily stupid — one.

On Thursday evening during dinner, Regulus found himself seated with all his friends: Barty, Evan, and Mulciber to his left, Severus and Avery across from them, with Melania, Amaryllis, and Isa nearby. Regulus had done an exquisite job at avoiding Isa this week – although part of it was also thanks to Evan and Amaryllis, who took turns sitting with her in classes, leaving Regulus free to partner with Barty. There was no real reason for things to be *this* strained between them; they could have simply ignored the incident and carried on, but somehow the involvement of their friends added a peculiar weight to the situation. And Regulus had to admit that it sort of suited him – he had a hard time not thinking about that moment in the Notts’ library when taking in Isa’s contemplative, brown eyes, so it was better to avoid them for a bit; he would be off to Beauxbatons in a couple of days anyway, and perhaps some time apart could ease the situation a bit. Still, they would still find each other during mealtimes, although always accompanied by their friends.

As for Potter’s next move – well, with about ten Slytherins ready *and* eager to draw their wands at him halfway through their roast chicken, his approach to the Slytherin table was both unexpected and impressively bold. Potter walked up with his hands in his pockets, his expression tense — but surprisingly not as tense as one might expect, given the small army of Slytherins now eyeing him with suspicion, wands at the ready.

"Easy, folks," Potter said, barely acknowledging the hostile stares. He raised an eyebrow at Regulus's friends with an amused smirk before shifting his gaze directly to Regulus. "I need to talk to you."

Regulus, in the middle of a bite of chicken, glanced around at his friends. He nodded at them, indicating they could lower their wands, then turned to Potter. "It can hardly be important enough to interrupt me mid-drumstick." He took another bite, trying to strike a balance between a feigned air of disinterest and his discomfort at Potter's presence around his friends.

Potter's eyes were unyielding, his voice steady. "It is."

Regulus's stomach clenched, though his face remained impassive – had someone found out? It would be the only explanation for the seriousness in Potter's tone and the way he'd risked the entire Slytherin table's wrath just to speak to him. Still – he kept his expression cool as he pushed his plate aside, rose slowly, and brushed nonexistent crumbs from his robes.

With the entire table watching, Regulus stepped away from his friends and strode out of the Great Hall beside Potter. As they passed, murmurs rippled through the hall, students abandoning their own meals to watch the strange sight of Regulus Black leaving with James Potter. Regulus caught a glimpse of Sirius, seated stiffly at the Gryffindor table, his face expressionless but his gaze sharp and unblinking.

Outside the hall, a tense silence fell between Regulus and Potter. The sounds of chatter and clinking cutlery faded behind them, leaving only the echo of their footsteps as they walked down the Entrance Hall. Regulus steeled himself, his mind racing through the possibilities, but he maintained his outward calm.

"Charms classroom?" Regulus suggested, his voice low.

Potter shook his head. "No — this... we can handle right here."

This confused Regulus possibly even more. "Then – what could possibly be this important, Potter?"

Potter locked eyes with Regulus, a very serious and slightly frustrated expression on his face. "You haven't signed up for try-outs."

Silence.

Regulus blinked.

What?

"What?" he asked flatly.

Potter rolled his eyes. "I've just been given the official list for Saturday's try-outs." A silence stretched between them. "And you're not on it."

What?

"Yes," Regulus drawled slowly, "obviously."

Potter let out a nervous, slightly hysterical laugh. "No — no, Black. You're going to try out."

Regulus raised a single eyebrow, unable to suppress his irritation. "So, let me get this straight. You risked being hexed by half the Slytherin table and interrupted my dinner... for *try-outs*?"

Potter was unfazed by this, and instead let out another nervous laugh, returning to what he apparently considered the heart of the matter. "*Why* aren't you on the list?"

Regulus gave an exaggerated sigh, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Well, Potter, I would imagine that my absence from the list indicates that I'm not trying out."

But Potter simply shook his head, another anxious laugh escaping him. "No — no, you don't get to do this to me."

"*What* Potter?" Regulus asked, more and more realising how weird this situation was as Potter's face grew almost panicked.

"Look, Black," he said, his voice low, "we're in this together."

"In what?"

"In everything!" he whisper-shouted. "The unity assignments, Christmas, Davies, Moony — all of it."

Regulus tilted his head in contemplation.

Were they in this together?

"Oh Merlin, you're only now realising this, Black?" Potter shot him

irritated.

Regulus had to admit that it was a refreshing change to see Potter without his signature, careless smirk and twinkling eyes. As much as he might have had a weak spot for those, it was oddly satisfying to see that not everything came easily to Potter.

“Look,” Potter continued, his voice bossy now. “I want to win this Cup. And I can’t win it without you. So you’re going to try out, you’re going to be part of the team, and you’re going to help me win it.”

“Look, Potter,” Regulus replied, aware of the fact that more and more people were trickling down the corridors after dinner, “I’m at Beauxbatons, I have O.W.L.s.”

Potter shook his head. “You could probably pass your N.E.W.T.s already, so exams are hardly an excuse. And I’m at Beauxbatons too — if I can get back to Hogwarts multiple times a week, you can too.”

Regulus saw Barty and Evan exiting the Great Hall, tentatively walking towards them but keeping their distance.

“Besides,” Potter pressed on, “when it comes to matches, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be in the stands, too. Don’t tell me the idea of sitting in the audience while we smash the other schools doesn’t leave you feeling… left out.”

“Technically, you just said that without me on the team, there won’t be any ‘smashing’ for you,” Regulus pointed out dryly.

Potter threw up his arms in exasperation. “Yes, very funny, Black — are you really okay watching from the stands while you could be flying?”

Regulus sighed. Potter was right — the idea of sitting in the stands, watching the Hogwarts Seeker probably making a complete fool of himself…

“I’ll do anything,” Potter pressed.

“Anything?” Regulus asked, eyebrows raised. “Like — leaving me alone?”

Potter let out a bark of laughter, his eyes twinkling — and then bit his lip.

Damn.

“Oh, Black,” Potter said, his voice mockingly low and dangerous, “that’s a tough request.”

Regulus had a hard time not laughing at that, but kept his face composed, aware of the audience in the corridor.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” Potter asked, smirking.

Regulus sighed, annoyed.

“I’ll owe you,” Potter pressed, taking a step back with the sight of Evan and Barty in the corner of his eyes.

“You will,” Regulus nodded.

“So, you're in?”

Regulus sighed again. “Yes, Potter. I’m in.”

“Yes!” Potter cheered, pumping his fist triumphantly. Grinning ear to ear, he tossed Regulus a secretive wink before turning on his heel and striding away.

As he passed Barty and Evan, Potter gave them a nod, clearly trying to compose himself and mask his excitement. But a little further down the corridor, he apparently couldn’t hold it in any longer and let out an exuberant whoop of victory.

Regulus shook his head in disbelief, stifling a laugh, then shrugged off the encounter and fell into step with his friends as they headed toward the dungeons.

“What did that tosser want?” Evan asked immediately.

“Nothing special,” Regulus replied. “Just asked if I wanted to try out. You know — Quidditch.”

“Will you?” Evan pressed.

“Yeah, why not,” Regulus shrugged.

“Of course,” Barty added, his earlier disdain for Potter shifting into a wicked grin, “you’ve got some French witches to woo, after all.”

*****

Saturday arrived quickly. Regulus woke with a heavy surge of adrenaline for this unholy hour — everyone else in the dormitory was still fast asleep, likely exhausted from the supposed 'party prep' that had carried on late into the night. Knowing he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, Regulus quietly pulled on most of his Quidditch gear and headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

As expected, the hall was nearly empty; only the world's most dedicated swots and the few others trying out for the team would willingly be up this early. With so few people around, Regulus felt every head turn his way as he made his way to the Slytherin table.

Unsurprisingly, Davies was there — a Ravenclaw in his N.E.W.T. year, likely off to the library soon. Catching Regulus's eye, Davies offered a small nod, which Regulus returned with a faint nod of his own. There were a few other Ravenclaws scattered around the hall, along with a handful of Hufflepuffs, including Bones, last year's Seeker, who looked positively queasy at the sight of Regulus in his Quidditch kit.

At the Slytherin table, he spotted Coldgrave, who was trying out for Chaser, as well as Mollet and Dorne, last year's Beaters. Finally, Regulus's gaze shifted to the Gryffindor table, where he immediately locked eyes with a cold, hard stare from Sirius. Regulus held his brother's gaze just a fraction longer than necessary, betraying no emotion, before letting his eyes drift to Potter. Pale and visibly tense, Potter was staring down at his untouched breakfast, seemingly lost in thought.

Regulus hadn't flown much over the summer, so he decided to take a few laps around the pitch before tryouts began. On his way out of the Great Hall, he spotted his friends trickling in for breakfast.

"See you in a bit, mate!" Evan called.

"We'll be cheering you on, Black!" Avery added.

"Smash them with your *L-O-V-E*, Black!" Barty chimed in with a smirk.

Regulus rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress a smile at his friends' support. He slipped outside, took a steadying breath, and composed himself.

He wasn't particularly worried about the tryouts themselves; as for the position of Seeker, there was hardly any competition, so something would have to go *really* south for him not to get on the team. What unsettled him more was the likelihood of ending up on the same team

as both Sirius *and* Potter – Sirius was a top-notch Beater, so he'd probably make the cut as well, meaning they'd have to… cooperate. They'd have to share the locker room, listen to Potter's pep talks, maybe even clap hands after a win. The whole idea was surreal — and, frankly, a bit nauseating.

Bloody Dumbledore with his stupid unity projects. Throwing *all* the houses onto one bloody Quidditch team.

The second he entered the locker room, his concern was underscored instantly; Regulus found Sirius and Potter already there, and the air was heavy with tension. Regulus and Sirius locked eyes — a cold, mirrored stare-off, their identical grey eyes hard and cold. Potter hovered uncomfortably nearby until, with an awkward cough, he decided enough was enough.

"All right," Potter said, glancing between the brothers. "You two will probably make the team, so… we need to figure out how to work together."

Regulus looked at Potter, then back at Sirius, giving a curt nod. "Fine."

Sirius crossed his arms, scowling. "Yeah, fine," he muttered, then added, "but don't expect me to like it." With one last glare at Regulus, he stormed out, leaving Regulus and Potter alone.

Regulus arched an eyebrow. "Seems like he's thrilled I'm trying out," he remarked dryly.

Potter sighed, visibly uncomfortable. "Yeah… he was actually glad you weren't on the list. Still hasn't quite forgiven me for talking you into trying out."

"Then why go through the trouble?" Regulus asked, intrigued.

"Because I can't win without you," Potter replied, running a hand through his hair in exasperation. "You're the best Seeker Hogwarts has had in ages. I can't bloody win this with Bones."

Regulus felt a flicker of pride at the praise but kept his expression neutral. Potter looked pale, visibly tense, as he started pacing the room.

"What's wrong, Potter? Why so stressed?" Regulus asked.

Potter paused, then it was as if a dam had burst. “I don’t know if I’m up for this! I haven’t even been a captain before — let alone of a team competing in an *international* tournament – everyone’s watching, everyone has these expectations — ‘You’ll be great, Potter! You’re the only one for the job!’ — and what if I end up picking too many Gryffindors for the team? People will complain, call it nepotism, and —”

“Potter,” Regulus interrupted. Potter looked up, startled by his own outburst. “Are you leading to win, or are you leading to get everyone’s approval?”

Potter blinked, surprised, and then nodded. “I want to win, of course.”

“Then sod the rest,” Regulus replied coolly. “Pick whoever fits best, regardless of their house. Isn’t that the point anyway — to get past the house boundaries?”

“Yeah,” Potter said, the tension in his face clearly easing. “You’re right.”

“People have high expectations of you for a reason, Potter,” Regulus continued. “You would’ve been captain last year if you weren’t in fifth year. They were just waiting for you to be eligible — and the fact that you were chosen over seventh-years speaks volumes about the confidence the staff has in you.”

Potter held Regulus’s gaze, taken aback by this unexpected pep talk.

“And it’s not baseless, too,” Regulus added. “Your name’s come up in the Ministry’s Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

Potter looked momentarily nauseous. “Not helping, Black.”

Understandable.

“Listen,” Regulus said sternly, “the Ministry only talks about students with extraordinary talent. Even if you have a bad day — or a whole bad season — you’re still better suited for this than anyone else.”

Potter relaxed further, the tension melting into a quiet relief. He offered Regulus a genuine smile. “Thanks, Black.”

Regulus returned a small, sincere smile, ignoring the unexpected flutter in his chest. He coughed lightly to steady himself. “You alright?”

Potter nodded. “Yeah, thanks. Just need a minute.”

With a nod, Regulus headed out to the pitch, leaving Potter to collect himself in solitude. He noticed the stands were already filling with students from all houses, along with a few professors — even this early on a Saturday. The level of interest in the international tournament was intense, and it made the tryouts feel more like an actual match.

Regulus took a deep breath, blocking out the crowd’s buzz, and set off on a few laps around the pitch to centre himself. The morning air was sharp and invigorating, and as he flew, he felt his muscles loosening, his nerves settling. After a couple of circuits, he glanced at the stands, spotting his friends — Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, and Severus — all chanting and cheering in their usual rowdy style. Behind them sat the girls, and there, just slightly apart, was Isa. She met his gaze with her warm brown eyes and gave him a small, encouraging smile.

Allowing himself a small smile in return, Regulus exhaled, diving toward the ground where Potter was already gathering the players trying out.

This was going to be fun.

*****

It turned out to be boring rather than fun.

Potter had set seven snitches loose, and gave Regulus and Bones – the only ones trying out for Seeker – the assignment to catch them as soon as possible with, naturally, the one catching the most securing his position on the team. It took Regulus about half an hour to catch six, which might have made this try-out the most boring so far – rather anticlimactic considering the fact it was for a cross-house team up against Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Now, although his job was done, he could hardly go back to the Castle with the rest of the team still trying out, so he just flew a few casual loops around the pitch, occasionally landing to see the rest of the try-outs unfold. Unsurprisingly, Sirius made the cut and was one of the Beaters, partnered with a seventh-year Hufflepuff, Warlow. Also unsurprisingly, the Macmillan sisters became the two Chasers alongside Potter; they were a well-oiled machine, so it was to be expected. The Keeper was the seventh-year Ravenclaw, Hedge. Regulus had to admit that the lineup was rather impressive.

Around them, the entire pitch had transformed into a carnival of noise

and colour; half the school had turned out to watch, crammed into the stands with a sea of multi-colored scarves, banners, and flags waving furiously. Some of the more enthusiastic students fired off colourful fireworks that crackled in bursts of green, gold, blue, and red, each one erupting to cheers or playful jeers. It was a spectacle as grand as any final, with groups of younger students chanting house songs and tossing confetti charmed to hover in the air around the pitch. Potter, looking more cheerful than ever – and that was saying something considering his general cheerfulness – made a grand show of presenting his newly-formed team. He had them all line up and bow for the stands, basking in the applause that erupted from all sides. Regulus, despite his better judgement, had grudgingly joined in, though he hid a small smile at the ridiculousness of it all, especially when he caught sight of his friends' antics in the crowd, their cheers louder than anyone's.

As the applause finally began to die down, Potter clapped his hands and summoned the team to the locker room. Regulus trudged behind, watching Potter and Sirius leading the way, laughing and joking around – he forced himself to look away. Oddly enough, he didn't quite know which of the two he envied more.

"All right, champs!" Potter began once they were all in the locker room, his energy undiminished despite the hours spent out on the pitch. "Exquisite job today — we're going to be the best team Hogwarts has seen in years, and we're going to smash Durmstrang and Beauxbatons!" The smile on his face stretched from ear to ear. "Training starts Tuesday, then Thursdays and Saturday mornings — possibly more if we need it." A collective groan rose from the group.

Beauxbatons, Hogwarts, three times training, his mission, the Pure Quill… – it was a good thing that Regulus barely slept anyway.

As the players dispersed, Potter called out, "Black —" both Sirius and Regulus turned toward him "–err, Regulus – young Black – stay behind a moment."

Sirius shot Potter a disgruntled look, lingering by the door for a second as if deciding whether to stay, then, with a piercing glare at Regulus, stalked out. Regulus glanced over his shoulder, watching his brother go, then turned to face Potter.

"Thanks again for the, uh, pep talk," Potter said, a touch awkwardly. Regulus rolled his eyes, resisting the urge to sigh.

“Really, it was hardly a pep talk,” he replied dryly, feeling more than a little self-conscious under Potter’s gaze.

Potter looked at him for a moment, then seemed to gather himself. “Right. So – goodbye party tonight?” he asked, his tone casual but a little too light.

Regulus shrugged. “Yeah,” he nodded. Silence fell between them, stretching out just long enough to feel uncomfortable. Then, with a faint cough, Potter cleared his throat, a tight smile on his face.

“So, you’re going with Warrington, then?”

Regulus shifted, feeling a prick of annoyance.

“I guess,” he said, his voice guarded. He hesitated, then added, almost defensively, “What… do you – do you care?”

Potter shrugged, though his expression was unreadable.

“I don’t,” he replied, a little too quickly. “She’s rather kind. And pretty.”

Regulus raised his eyebrows – *where* was Potter going with this?

After a moment, Potter took a breath, as if debating something, and gave a short nod.

They walked toward the door together, and just as they reached it, Potter paused, glancing back at Regulus with an expression that was almost — though not quite — serious.

“Just remember, Black,” he said, voice lowered, “don’t do anything… you don’t want to do.”

Regulus frowned, the cryptic remark hanging in the air as Potter left the locker room, rejoining Sirius just outside. For a moment, Regulus watched the two of them stride off together, laughing about something, before heading out on his own, his mind still lingering on Potter’s words.

*****

As expected, Barty, Evan, Mulciber, and Avery had outdone themselves organising the farewell party. The Slytherin common room had been transformed, dimly lit with green and silver lights that bounced off the walls and some very unfortunate banners were strung

up – Regulus took in the sight of *'France Better Watch Out: Black Magic Incoming'* with much dismay.

They'd even managed to smuggle in an impressive stash of firewhisky and other liquor, and with the wireless blasting through the common room, nearly everyone was drinking, laughing and drinking together. Isa was spinning and laughing with Amaryllis and Melania, her movements fluid and unguarded – the looks Evan was casting Melania didn't go past Regulus, nor the fact that Mulciber lingered nearby, his gaze fixed on Isa's every move a little too intently. Regulus had a hard time suppressing the irritation at the sight.

Meanwhile, Eira had pulled him onto the dance floor, her hand firm in his as she led him in a spirited twist around the crowded room. She was, undeniably, both kind and attractive, laughing freely as they danced, her loose black hair bouncing with every movement. But even though Regulus tried to relax and enjoy it, he felt a strange awkwardness settle over him, unsure what exactly was expected of him here. Was he supposed to kiss her? The idea flitted through his mind, but instead of excitement, he only felt a strange reluctance – especially as he clearly had multiple sets of careful eyes on him; Evan and Barty glancing over with knowing smirks, and Isa, who looked on from the edge of the room, her expression unreadable.

Regulus forced himself to look at Eira, her smile and her blue eyes. She looked at him expectantly, her eyes warm and encouraging, and though she seemed perfectly content, he found himself battling an increasing feeling of unease.

Suddenly, Eira leaned closer, her voice low. "How about… heading up … to your dorm?" she asked, her smile inviting yet casual.

Regulus froze, but then, for some reason, he heard himself say "Yes." The word slipped out before he could stop it, even though every nerve in his body felt tense.

As they made their way out of the common room and up the stairs, his mind raced – what was expected of him? Was he supposed to do something? *Shit* , *shit* , he wasn't like Evan or Barty; they'd have no problem inventing on the fly what to do with a girl in their dorm. The whole thing felt like a bloody maze with no map, and Regulus couldn't shake the growing panic.

Once inside his dormitory, Eira perched on the edge of his bed, her laughter easy, her smile broad as she chatted about something he

barely registered. Regulus nodded along, feigning calm as he fought to quiet his pounding heart. Then, before he could overthink any further, she leaned in, her hand resting on his arm, her face inches from his, lips nearly touching his—

Bam.

The door flew open with a loud bang as Isa burst into the room – her face flushed, her usual calm nowhere to be found and, Regulus recognised, having had a couple of drinks.

"I need to talk to you, you bloody—" She cut off abruptly, her expression freezing as she took in the scene: Eira perched on Regulus's bed, practically in his lap, her face still *awfully* close to his. Isa's face went completely pale, while Regulus felt heat flooding his own, his cheeks burning scarlet.

"Oh, Merlin, sorry, I didn't realise –" Isa said, her eyes wide with horror, taking back a few steps awkwardly.

"No, *stay*, Nott," Regulus snapped, his embarrassment flaring into anger. "Please, go on. Tell me — what is it you had to say? The floor's all yours." He gestured, feigning indifference though he could feel his pulse drumming in his ears.

Eira, looking mortified, scrambled off his bed, casting a sidelong glance between him and Isa. She clearly sensed the tension and, flustered, she gave a quick, awkward nod.

"Um, I think I'll… go," she muttered, retreating hastily toward the door. "See you later, Regulus."

Once Eira had gone, an uncomfortable silence filled the room, and Regulus could feel Isa's eyes on him. Her face was still pale, her expression tinged with something between surprise and hurt.

"Sorry, Reg. I didn't know you'd have a girl up here…" Isa trailed off, glancing away. "I just… didn't think you were the type to—"

"Oh, really?" Regulus interrupted, the words escaping before he could stop himself. "Well, we can't all be sneaking off to do a Ravenclaw in a cupboard three times a week, can we?"

The hurt flickered in Isa's eyes, unmistakable, and he regretted it immediately. She looked down, biting her lip, and Regulus sighed, pressing his hands over his face.

“I’m sorry, Ies,” he whispered, his voice muffled by his hands.

Isa shifted, wrapping her arms around herself as if to steady herself.

“I’m worried about you,” she said softly. “We haven’t properly talked in what feels like ages, and… after everything that happened in Damascus, I just—”

“I don’t want to talk about Damascus, Isa,” Regulus said sharply, his hands falling to his sides as he straightened, forcing himself to look at her. “Drop it.”

“You have to talk about it, Reg,” she insisted, her voice shaking a little. “You’ve been keeping everything bottled up, and it’s not—”

“I don’t have to do a bloody thing,” he snapped, his tone turning icy. “Can you get that through your head? You’re not entitled to – to anything!”

Isa’s eyes widened, a flash of hurt passing across her face. “I know, but I want to help—”

“You can’t help me!” Regulus burst out, a hollow, bitter laugh escaping him as his voice rose. Something inside him felt as though it was shattering, all his carefully controlled restraint snapping. “The only way you can help is by getting off my bloody back for once, can’t you understand that?”

Isa took a step back, the brief flicker of hurt replaced by a sharp, furious glint in her eyes. The silence that hung between them felt taut, ready to snap, and then suddenly, Barty and Evan appeared in the doorway, probably drawn by the shouting. They looked from Isa to Regulus – expressions a mixture of surprise and concern, neither of them daring to interrupt.

Isa turned on her heel, her face flushed and livid.

“Fine, Regulus. Enjoy the solitude you’re so desperate for,” she spat, her voice thick with emotion.

And without another word, she shoved past Barty and Evan and stormed down the dorm, her footsteps echoing off the walls.

The room fell silent, tension hanging in the air. For a moment, Regulus stood motionless, breathing heavily, until the frustration boiled over.

“FUCK!” he screamed, lashing out blindly and striking a pile of books stacked near his bed, sending them sprawling across the floor with a loud thud.

Barty and Evan exchanged glances before tentatively stepping inside.

“You… alright, Black?” Barty ventured, his voice cautious.

Regulus clenched his jaw, exasperation flaring at the question he was sick to death of hearing. He tilted his head back, eyes fixed on the ceiling, and let out a sarcastic laugh.

“Yes, Barty. Absolutely perfect,” he said with bitter sarcasm, not bothering to look at them.

Without another word, he shoved past them and stalked off down the dorm, making his way to the bathroom, leaving Barty and Evan behind in stunned silence.

Chapter 5: Of Beauxbatons & Cruelty

Beauxbatons would be a turning point in Regulus's life in different ways – although, naturally, he only came to realise that afterwards. Because well, that was how these things worked.

Regulus, Potter and Khan were expected in the Headmaster's office Sunday afternoon to take the Floo network directly to Beauxbatons. All Regulus's friends had gathered around him through lunch in the Great Hall – an exaggerated procession of emotional farewells that he found both amusing and embarrassing. Isa had been pointedly absent, and it didn't go past Regulus that Davies also didn't show up at the Ravenclaw table for lunch. Still, Evan, Barty, Severus, Mulciber, Avery, Amaryllis, and Melania had all joined him for his 'last meal', putting on dramatic displays of despair, dramatically bemoaning how they'd be nothing without him. Barty, with a hand to his heart, muttered about the unbearable emptiness Regulus was leaving behind while Evan solemnly echoed him, eyes brimming with comically overdone grief. Rolling his eyes, Regulus had reminded them repeatedly that he'd only be gone for two days, back in time for Quidditch practice – but no one, least of all Evan or Barty, was having it.

After lunch, Regulus packed his last stuff – except for some spare clothes for when he'd be back for Quidditch practice, and self-consciously put on the Beauxbatons robes in the bathroom. It felt weird – wearing tailored, dark blue silk robes with a sharp, clean cut. He felt almost ostentatious in the robes and much more preferred the black ones from Hogwarts that were plain in comparison, so he exited the bathroom very awkwardly.

He hoped to pass through the common room unnoticed – he had said his goodbyes to everyone anyway – but *of course* luck wasn't on his side; it was a rainy Sunday afternoon, so the turn-out in the common room was higher than ever.

Avery was the first to notice, grinning at Regulus in his new outfit, but it was Barty who let out a low whistle, a wicked smile across his face.

"Fuck Black, you clean up well."

"Absolutely," Evan chimed in, lounging against the fireplace with a smirk. "Those robes do wonders for you. Really bring out the eyes."

Regulus rolled his eyes in annoyance and hoped the heat in his neck didn't show. "Oh, shut up, both of you."

Amaryllis gave him an approving nod, a genuine smile breaking through the banter. "No, they're right, you know. It suits you."

Regulus said a quick goodbye, waving off their laughter, whistles and playful jeers as he headed out of the common room. He was halfway down the hallway when he caught sight of Isa – she lingered by the dungeon's entrance, giving him a small, almost hesitant smile.

"Good luck," she said softly, eyes flicking to his robes with a slight nod. "And… say hi to my cousins for me."

Regulus gave her a nod and a small, though still stiff, smile in return. "Will do. See you soon."

And with that, he was off – sure, he would be back multiple times a week, so it didn't feel like he'd be cut off entirely from Hogwarts and his friends, but it still felt strange; new people, new surroundings, new mission…

When Regulus finally entered Dumbledore's office, the room was quiet, the atmosphere thick with anticipation. McGonagall and Slughorn were speaking quietly with Khan by the fireplace, while Dumbledore greeted Regulus and shot him a warm smile. Regulus greeted him formally in return, after which his gaze drifted to Potter. Potter looked handsome in his own Beauxbatons-blue robes, but as soon as his eyes landed on Regulus, something strange happened – Potter seemed to freeze.

Regulus, being used to Potter greeting him with some flirty or joking remark in settings like these, was surprised by Potter's fixed and unmistakably intense gaze as his eyes lingered on the sharp lines of Regulus's robes. Then, his eyes flicked up to meet Regulus's own and – it took a second for Regulus to realise, Potter *blushed*.

It did something with Regulus's gut he couldn't quite name – a flicker of something and a quickened heartbeat, and yet – Regulus had no idea why – he found it hilarious, seeing Potter, usually so confident and glib, visibly awkward, vulnerable and lost for words just at the sight of him in these admittedly ridiculous, tailored blue robes.

Suppressing a laugh, Regulus raised an eyebrow, letting a small smirk play on his lips.

“What’s the matter, Potter?” he drawled, his voice low – almost a whisper. “Cat got your tongue?”

Potter blinked, almost as if snapping out of a trance. He cleared his throat, clearly trying to find his footing. “No — no, of course not…”

Regulus had a hard time stifling his laugh although he felt a flush rising in his own chest, warmth flooding his stomach at Potter’s flustered state.

Then, McGonagall’s voice broke through the moment, bringing them back to the rest of the room. “Mr. Black, Mr. Potter, are you ready?” She looked at them with an arched eyebrow.

“Yes, Professor,” Regulus replied, glancing at Potter one last time before turning to the fireplace. Potter’s gaze lingered for a second longer before he, too, moved to stand beside Regulus.

McGonagall gave her final reminders, her voice steady and precise. “This is a rare opportunity to represent Hogwarts. Remember, each of you will join a different guild, so you’ll have ample chances to make an impression. Show respect, behave yourselves, and above all, make us proud.”

With that, they all took a handful of floo powder, stepping into the fireplace one by one. With a swirl of green flames, Regulus disappeared, his last glimpse of the office marked by the flicker of Potter’s gaze, a look that stayed with him as he tumbled through the Floo network and landed in the elegant Headmistress’s office at Beauxbatons.

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Naturally, Beauxbatons was like a palace straight from a Muggle fairytale – grand with gleaming marble floors, towering white spires, and glistering blue granite walls shimmering under the warm afternoon light. Chandeliers hung elegantly from vaulted ceilings with an enchanted grand piano playing softly in the Entrance Hall. The dining hall was no less impressive, with enchanted harps strumming notes through the air and vast windows offering a view of the pristine gardens beyond – manicured lawns, beds of vibrant flowers, and fountains that cast delicate rainbows into the misty air.

After meeting the Headmaster, Beaumont, an older wizard with a meticulously groomed silver beard and a welcoming but formal air, they were instructed to wait for the Head Girl, who would escort them

to the Dining Hall. Regulus groaned inwardly – he truly hoped they wouldn't be subjected to any sort of grand introduction. The thought of being paraded in front of the entire Beauxbatons student body made his stomach churn.

"Wow," Potter whispered, wide-eyed as he took in the elegance of the Headmaster's office – an impressive space with arched windows, rich tapestries, and a soft blue carpet woven with silver stars. "Makes us Hogwarts lot feel positively uncultured, doesn't it?"

Regulus snorted. "Speak for yourself. Some of us have seen a palace or two before."

Potter rolled his eyes but smiled faintly. "Naturally."

"It's just… beautiful," Khan murmured, glancing around in awe. "I'm curious to see what the rest of this place looks like."

Just then, the door opened, and a young woman entered – blonde, with brown eyes that sparkled with amusement, her features graceful and refined. A faint smirk tugged at the corners of her lips as she greeted Beaumont in lightly accented English.

"Good evening, Headmaster." She dipped her head politely before turning to the Hogwarts group. Her eyes landed on Regulus, and her expression brightened. Switching to French, her tone warmed with unmistakable fondness.

"Regulus! How have you been?"

Regulus blinked. He was confused – she was *so* familiar, but he couldn't quite place her…

Then recognition sparked – Isa's cousin.

"Danielle."

"I haven't seen you in ages!" Danielle said, stepping closer and confidently placing her hands on his shoulders, her smile radiant. Potter and Khan exchanged baffled glances as French spilled rapidly between them.

"I was thrilled when I heard you'd be joining us," Danielle continued, her tone genuinely excited. "Isa's told me so much about you."

"Has she?" Regulus replied, his smile polite but faintly stiff.

“Yes – you’re going to absolutely *adore* Beauxbatons.”

Danielle’s gaze flicked to Potter and Khan, and she switched back to English with a seamless fluidity. “Ah, forgive me! And you must be James Potter and Nadia Khan.”

After quick introductions, Danielle led the group out of the office, falling into step beside Khan while chatting amiably. Regulus and Potter trailed behind, their footsteps echoing in the marble corridor.

“Of course, you’d already know the first person we meet here,” Potter teased, glancing sidelong at Regulus.

“Isa’s cousin,” Regulus pointed out.

“Ah,” Potter nodded – then, after a beat, he looked at Regulus, eyebrows furrowed in amazement as he came to another conclusion. “Hang on – you speak *French? Fluently*?”

Regulus rolled his eyes – clearly Sirius had done a poor job of informing his best friend on their upbringing. “I’m broadly educated, Potter.”

Potter let out a small, incredulous laugh. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

Regulus looked away, ignoring the strange flutter in his chest at the praise, trailing his gaze over the palace’s hallways, lined with statues in marble alcoves and grotesque paintings. Golden light filtered through stained glass windows, casting a warm glow over the polished stone floors and filling the corridors with a dreamlike ambiance.

At last, they arrived at the dining hall – a grand, circular room with round tables scattered throughout, seating clusters of elegantly dressed students. The low hum of conversation died out the moment they stepped inside. Hundreds of eyes turned toward the newcomers, their curiosity palpable. Regulus’s stomach tightened uncomfortably.

Really, the parade would’ve been better.

“Is this awkward, or is it just me?” Potter whispered.

“Nope,” Regulus replied in a low voice. “*Very* awkward, Potter.”

Unfazed, Danielle led them to a table near the centre of the room. Students watched them unabashedly, whispering behind delicate

hands. Danielle stopped at a table already occupied by a girl who bore a striking resemblance to her.

“Estelle.”

The younger girl squealed in delight. “You remember me!”

She launched into a rapid stream of French, her enthusiasm infectious. Danielle rolled her eyes indulgently. “Estelle, let them breathe.”

Regulus shot her a small smile. “Nice to see you again, Estelle.”

He glanced at Potter and Khan, both of whom looked utterly lost.

“English,” he suggested awkwardly, and Danielle obliged with a gracious smile.

At that moment, Headmaster Beaumont rose. His movements were graceful, commanding attention without effort. The other professors followed suit, taking their places at the long, ornately carved table at the head of the room.

“Bienvenue, students,” Beaumont began, his voice resonant yet warm, carrying easily over the clinking of glasses and the murmurs of conversation. “It is with great pride and anticipation that we welcome you to another year at Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. For those of you joining us for the first time — especially our guests from Hogwarts — know that you are now part of a community that values excellence, artistry, and camaraderie above all.” His eyes flicked briefly toward Regulus, Potter, and Khan, his expression kind but assessing. “May this year be one of growth, exploration, and achievement for you all. Bon appétit.”

Polite applause rippled through the room as Beaumont took his seat, and the tables were soon adorned with an array of sumptuous dishes. Delicate coq au vin in earthenware pots, golden baguettes with a glistening crust, creamy gratin dauphinois rich with the scent of garlic and herbs, and vibrant platters of cheese, fresh fruits, and charcuterie made the hall come alive with colour and aroma.

Regulus picked at a piece of baguette, his movements calm and composed, but his sharp eyes scanned the hall out of habit. He caught himself lingering on the staff table, where his gaze collided with a pair of twinkling, mischievous eyes — Professor Thorne.

Thorne reclined in his chair, like always with the air of someone who

found life perpetually amusing. His lips quirked into a playful smirk as he raised his goblet in a mock toast. Then, with a flourish that bordered on theatrical, he winked directly at Regulus before taking a slow sip of his drink.

Regulus barely stopped himself from reacting, focusing instead on folding a napkin in his lap. He couldn't let anything show.

Potter, however, was far less subtle. He started slightly, his fork clattering against his plate.

"What is Thorne doing here?" Potter asked, his eyes darting between Regulus and the staff table.

Regulus allowed himself a nonchalant shrug, though he could *feel* Potter's scrutiny. "I don't know. You know how they never last more than a year at Hogwarts," he said airily, breaking a piece of baguette and taking a deliberate bite.

"Yeah, I guess," Potter muttered, his tone doubtful as his gaze lingered on Thorne, who had now turned his attention to another professor, chatting animatedly.

After a few moments, Danielle and Estelle rejoined the conversation, asking politely what Guild each of the Hogwarts students had been assigned to.

"Philosophy," Regulus answered.

"Alchemy," Potter said, casting a curious glance around the room.

"Astronomy," Khan added, beaming.

Beauxbatons was organised quite differently from Hogwarts. Instead of houses, the school was divided into three prestigious "Guilds": *Les Alchimistes*, *Les Philosopheurs*, and *Les Étoiles*, which loosely translated to Alchemy, Philosophy, and Astronomy – although the latter also included Magical Healing.

Within the Philosophy Guild, Regulus would be studying classes like *Philosophical Potions* – focusing on the psychological effects and ethics of potions – and *Défense Mystique*, *Ethics of Magic*, and *Social & Political Philosophy*. Unlike Hogwarts, Beauxbatons grouped students not strictly by year but rather in two age bands, mixing students from ages eleven to fourteen and those from fifteen to eighteen, promoting a collaborative learning style across ages. Regulus had felt a mix of

anticipation and anxiety ever since hearing about the Guilds and the courses when Professor Slughorn had assigned him to choose his courses – ethics, philosophy and magic combined… *Brilliant* .

Then, apart from housing Quidditch and dressage teams – with the horrible Abraxan horses – Beauxbatons wasn't segregated as much as Hogwarts; students from different Guilds apparently mingled freely, and dormitories were randomly assigned, as were seats at mealtimes.

As the meal wound down and Beaumont officially brought dinner to a close, the students rose from their seats, heading to their common rooms and dormitories, though not without blatant stares at the Hogwarts students.

Danielle rose gracefully from the table and gestured for Regulus and Potter to follow her, leaving Khan to the care of her enthusiastic sister. She led them through a maze of candlelit corridors and up a spiral staircase, her footsteps echoing lightly against the marble floors.

"Handsome, he is," Danielle remarked in a low, conspiratorial tone, her words French but her meaning unmistakable as she glanced at Potter.

Regulus rolled his eyes and then – before he could stop himself – he blurted out: "He has a girlfriend."

Danielle arched a delicate brow, her expression momentarily disappointed. "Ah, vraiment? Quel dommage," she sighed. "Mon Dieu, I wish the French had more of both your traits."

Regulus coughed awkwardly, shifting his gaze to anywhere but her, finding Potter's confused gaze – he hadn't understood a thing from their exchange, of course.

"Sorry," Regulus muttered.

Potter, far from offended, looked amused. His lips curled into his signature smirk, his brown eyes alight with mischief as he leaned closer. "No need to apologise, Black," he said in a low voice, "you're bloody charming when you speak French."

Regulus stiffened, caught off guard, and struggled to find a retort that wouldn't betray the sudden flush creeping up his neck when Danielle came to a stop, making him realise they had reached the common room. Danielle pushed a set of tall double doors open with an elegant flourish.

“So, this is the common room,” she said, stepping aside to let them take in the space.

It was an expansive room with plush armchairs and carved tables arranged around a crackling fireplace, and the walls were lined with shelves filled with richly bound books. Tall arched windows framed views of the moonlit gardens outside and soft lighting bathed the space in a warm glow.

Danielle smiled. “There are six common rooms in the Palace. This one is yours. Feel free to relax here anytime.”

Regulus nodded in quiet appreciation, while Potter gave an awkward but sincere “Thanks.”

Danielle continued to lead them down a narrower hallway and up another staircase until they reached a tall, ornate door. She turned to them with a knowing smile.

“And here is your dormitory. Your class schedules should be with your belongings. Just be in the dining room tomorrow morning, and I’ll help you find your way. But no doubt, the other students will be more than eager to assist.”

Regulus nodded. “Thank you, Danielle.”

She winked. “Pas de problème,” she said breezily before turning on her heel and disappearing down the hallway, her footsteps fading into the distance.

Potter opened the door – and Regulus could hardly wait; he was very curious about the dormitory and the other French students; it was always easier to connect with your dormmates than random students, so they’d probably form a natural bridge to the other people in the palace.

Regulus took in the sight of the dorm. Unsurprisingly, the room was round – apparently a signature feature of Beauxbatons – with polished white marble walls and luxurious red carpets that softened the floor, lending a warmth to the otherwise pristine space. To one side, there was a cosy seating area with plush armchairs and a small table set in front of a fireplace.

Regulus let his gaze trail to the back of the room. Two sunken, circular sleeping pits were carved directly into the floor, each with a wide, inviting bed nestled within. The rounded alcoves were recessed

enough to suggest privacy, with a small walking space around the beds, as if they were two, open small rooms carved into the floor.

Regulus was so engrossed by all the new impressions the palace offered, and the details of the tapestries in the dormitory that it took a while for the realisation to set in like a large, heavy stone.

Two beds.

There were only two beds.

His eyes widened as he slowly turned toward Potter. Potter seemed to register it at the same moment; his own gaze darting to the beds, then back to Regulus, his mouth slightly agape.

They were sharing a dorm.

“Fuck,” Regulus whispered, frozen in shock.

Potter looked equally shocked.

“We’re … roommates?”

Fuck.

No, no – this couldn’t be happening. Sharing a dorm with Potter – the one person in the world Regulus wanted – no, *had* – to stay away from. The only person in the world who could stir so many confusing emotions in him – leaving him without words at his confident smirk, mischievous eyes, the way he clenched his lip between his teeth; leaving him annoyed beyond measure at his witty or cheeky remarks; leaving him laugh against his will at his careless, unrestrained humour and laughter. It was *cruel* to put them in a dorm together – like leaving an addict in a room with their poison of choice, a bear with honey, a moth with an open flame…

Just cruel. Fucking cruel.

Having to sleep just feet away from the bloke that he desperately tried to get out of his head at night; occupying his dreams in so many forbidden, maddening ways. Knowing he’d hear every breath, every shift in the bedclothes.

Cruel. So bloody cruel.

Potter seemed to sense Regulus’s awkwardness — or perhaps he was just trying to diffuse his own — and immediately filled the silence

with his usual unbothered enthusiasm.

“Oh, look!” he said brightly, pointing at the bed on the left. “This is me, apparently.” Without hesitation, he descended into the sunken alcove, poking around at his things and examining the space like it was the first time he’d seen a bed.

Regulus did the same – he went into the right bed-pit and busied himself with putting stuff away in the closet next to his bed in silence. He was torn between the idea of roaming the palace a bit and checking out the library, and staying in the comfortable, warm and enclosed surroundings of the dormitory so he wouldn’t have to mingle with probably very curious students.

The presence of Potter made it a bit less appealing to stay in the dorm – although that was merely a rational assessment; *truly* he didn’t want anything more than to stay here, in the magnetic presence of Potter, but rationally he knew he’d better not.

He sighed and quickly changed into a t-shirt and a pair of soft, drawstring trousers, and grabbed his timetable and a book from his stuff before he chose to settle in the cosy corner around the fireplace in the dorm. Lost in thought – panicky, anxious but also excited thoughts about the prospect of sharing a dorm with Potter – he put on the fire with his wand, letting the silence in the dorm stretch.

He discreetly took in the sight of Potter from the corner of his eyes; he had changed into a similar outfit – comfortable pants and a t-shirt – making him look incredibly handsome, the t-shirt leaving little of Potter’s muscular frame to the imagination. Potter was standing against the wall from his bed-pit, his eyes fixed on a piece of parchment, twisting his wands between his fingers effortlessly and absentmindedly.

Regulus swallowed and forced himself to return to this book, although he had to read the same sentence at least twenty times for him to even partially grasp the gist of it.

Eventually, it was Potter who broke the silence, now lying sprawled across his bed, arms tucked behind his head, one leg crossed lazily over the other.

“So — how’s your schedule? Are we sharing any classes?”

Regulus glanced at his timetable. “I don’t think so. Classes aren’t mixed across Guilds, apparently. I’ve got Friday afternoon off,

though."

"Ah, me too," Potter said, nodding as he skimmed his own timetable. "Do they really have so few classes here, or are we getting some kind of special treatment?"

Regulus shrugged. "Perhaps – they were talking about easing the workload with O.W.L.s and all."

Potter snorted. "Like you wouldn't pass with Outstandings at this very moment in your sleep."

Regulus suppressed the urge to smile, when his mind drifted back to the conversation with Cissy. "How're your O.W.L. results?"

Potter shrugged, his voice nonchalant. "I did fine."

Regulus arched an eyebrow – *fine?* Uncharacteristically modest.

He could hardly tell him that Cissy had discussed the fact that Potter had scored Outstandings in *all* his subjects, though, so he let it slide and then remembered something.

"Why not Astronomy?" he asked.

Potter looked at Regulus, confused. "What?"

"You're interested in Healing," Regulus pointed out. "The Astronomy Guild focuses on Magical Healing too – why not that Guild?"

Potter shrugged, but the way in which his eyes quickly darted away and back, made Regulus suspect there was more to it. "I like transfiguration."

With a non-verbal flick of his wand, Regulus summoned Potter's schedule, analysing it thoroughly. Transmutation, Charms, Potions, Defence…

"What's so fascinating about my schedule, Black?" Potter asked, annoyed, summoning it back with his wand.

"You're giving up on your Healing dream, Potter?" Regulus asked playfully – but then he saw the flicker in Potter's eyes.

And then it clicked.

"You're giving up your dream," Regulus concluded, his voice soft.

“You want to become an Auror.”

Potter looked surprised. “How – why – what?”

“You’re choosing these subjects because they’re the closest to the Auror package at Hogwarts,” Regulus explained. “You want to become an Auror – at the Ministry.”

Potter shrugged. “I still have two years at Hogwarts,” he said. “But Frank and Alice – you know, Longbottom and Fortescue, have started training over the holidays, and it sounded … incredible.”

Regulus nodded slowly, forcing his emotions far, *far* out of reach. Potter wanted to become an Auror – fight for the Ministry.

Regulus would be actively fighting him once the Revolution had taken off.

He took in the sight of Potter – sprawled on his bed, looking at the ceiling, looking so comfortable and handsome, and swallowed. Another reason why it could never happen. Why it would never be allowed.

Not much later, when they had both brushed their teeth, they both occupied their respective beds. It was strange to be so close to Potter, but still too far away. He wanted to hate it, hate it to be there with him, to hate it so much he’d request another dorm; but he didn’t; deep down he didn’t want anything more than being around Potter, and he’d never ever have this chance again; being *dorm mates* with him

“So, how was the party?” Potter asked unexpectedly, his tone casual. “The goodbye party.”

“Oh,” Regulus said, his voice heavy and tired. “It was alright.”

“No one half-dead in the hospital wing?”

Regulus laughed. “No – it was rather tame, to be honest.”

There was a silence.

“How’s things with Warrington?” Potter asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Regulus sighed.

“Alright,” he answered, stiffly. “Nothing special.”

There was another silence.

“Alright,” Potter murmured. “Good night, Black.”

“Night, Potter.”

Regulus casted a silencing spell non-verbally, making sure that Potter wouldn’t hear any of his screaming and fighting once the nightmares started.

He settled into his pillow, his mind racing and faintly, as he drifted off, he thought he could hear Potter talking, with somewhere in the distance, another voice — familiar, his brother’s — murmuring in reply.

*****

The first week at Beauxbatons was weird – but well, since shit hit the van after that, the time afterwards would turn out to be even weirder.

On their first morning in the dorm, Regulus woke up at the sound of Potter whistling a tune in the bathroom. It took Regulus a moment or two to realise that he was in France and currently sharing a room with Potter, when an even more bizarre fact struck him; Potter had woken up *before* him. This was completely new territory for Regulus, who was always the first to wake among his friends by a very long shot.

He groaned, sleep still thick in his head, as the sound of Potter stepping out of the bathroom reached his ears, followed by the soft padding of his footsteps toward his alcove.

“It shouldn’t be legal to be *that* cheerful in the morning, Potter,” Regulus muttered, his voice muffled by his pillow.

“Oh, but it *is* a cheerful morning, Black!” Potter’s voice rang back, full of too much energy. “Every morning we get to wake up and rise is a reason to be cheerful.”

Regulus groaned again, rolling over onto his back. “Oh, *toss off* with your morning gratitude, Potter.”

Potter let out a laugh that sounded way too bright for this early hour, and then threw a pillow at Regulus’s face. Grumbling, Regulus reluctantly dragged himself out of bed and made his way to the bathroom.

After getting ready, they both hesitated as they exited the dorm, then the common room, each trying to recall the way to the dining hall.

“Always a humbling experience, being reminded of what Selwyn must feel like,” Potter said with a smirk, as they both debated whether they needed to round the corner or not.

Regulus snorted. “Good thing she’s still at Hogwarts. Would’ve probably ended up dead behind a tapestry here.”

Potter barked out a laugh, shaking his head.

Eventually, they managed to find the dining room without too many detours, and they awkwardly settled at a table, watching French students slowly trickling in for breakfast. The room was alive with soft chatter, whispers at the Hogwarts students and the faint clink of cutlery.

The tables before them were laden with croissants, golden baguettes, small pots of creamy butter and fruit preserves, an assortment of cheeses, fresh berries, and delicate pastries that looked almost too beautiful to eat.

“No snails,” Potter nodded approvingly.

Regulus laughed. “Not for breakfast, no.”

As Regulus poured himself a cup of coffee, he was startled by a sudden, chaotic presence — a girl with brown hair and bright, light eyes, so energetic that even Potter’s morning cheer seemed grumpy in comparison. Her enthusiasm was so overwhelming that Regulus spilled his coffee, flinching in surprise. He quickly cleaned it up with a wave of his wand, trying to ignore Potter’s amused snicker beside him.

The girl looked between the two of them, her gaze switching from one to the other.

“You’re James Potter,” she said, pointing at Potter. “And you’re Regulus Black.” She turned and pointed at him.

Regulus and Potter exchanged a look, struggling to stifle their laughter.

“Is this Coolidge with Polyjuice Potion?” Regulus whispered under his breath.

Potter laughed and kicked him lightly to quiet him, then turned his full attention to the girl. “That’s right. And you are?”

Just as she was about to answer, two blokes approached, interrupting their exchange with cheerful grins directed at Regulus and Potter.

“Ah, the Hogwarts students,” one of them said. He appeared to be around Regulus’s age – though shorter and slightly chubby. “I’m Bastien.”

“And I’m Théo,” the other bloke said – same age, tall, kind faced.

Potter’s face broke into a charming smile. “Enchanté, guys.”

Regulus rolled his eyes at the poor attempt to impress them with his even poorer French.

“So,” the girl chipped in, looking from one to the other with eager curiosity, “What do you think of Beauxbatons? What Guild are you assigned to?”

The girl was apparently *very* enthusiastic and – thank Merlin – assigned to Alchemy, meaning that Regulus at least wouldn’t share classes with her. He discreetly suppressed a laugh, watching Potter’s expression as he realised he was in the same Guild as her.

Still, Potter was, naturally, kind and welcoming as ever, and immediately launched into an elaborate conversation about their subjects, the upcoming Quidditch tournament and so on. Regulus quietly sipped his coffee, his gaze drifting over the sea of students around them.

Although he couldn’t wait to dive into all the knowledge and hidden magic Beauxbatons had to offer, Regulus didn’t forget the reason why he was here; gathering information about the students, assessing the political climate…

There were around as many students at Beauxbatons as at Hogwarts – a little bit fewer, perhaps; with boys and girls more or less equally divided. There was no way to see who was assigned to what Guild – everyone’s robes were the same. Students were assigned to Guilds on arrival by preference and talent, so their placement was telling to some extent.

Regulus knew that students from all over Europe went to Beauxbatons – it was a much more international atmosphere than Hogwarts –

which also explained why most classes were in English; only classes with exclusively francophone students were taught in French. Still, as Regulus carefully took in the students entering the dining hall, it was clear that most students came from Europe and not outside; almost all students were clearly Caucasian. Another thing that stood out was that perhaps students from different Guilds mixed in the dining hall – students looked divided based on age; elder students clustering together and younger ones too.

As he slowly trailed his gaze to the far corner of the room, his eyes fell on a small group of older looking students – Regulus could tell immediately they were purebloods. The way they sat straight, the way they ate as per etiquette, the way the girls' hairs were braided – all of their ambiance gave away they belonged to traditional families. They looked slightly older than Potter, so they'd probably be in their last year. Just as he was to avert his gaze and focus on breakfast instead, Regulus's eyes interlocked with those of one of the blokes – dark, challenging eyes, complementing the eyebrows that suddenly arched, and the playful smirk that appeared on his face. He didn't look unkind – his look was calculating more than anything else. Regulus didn't look away, but instead gave a small nod in greeting, after which the bloke was pulled into a conversation with the rest of the table.

Regulus took a look at his schedule. "Any idea where Philosophical Potions is?" he asked, holding the parchment out to Bastien, who was casually sipping his coffee.

"Ah, Philosophical Potions," Bastien said, setting down his cup. "We've got Transmutation on the other side of the palace, but—" he gestured with a subtle tilt of his head. "That bloke over there is in your class."

Regulus followed Bastien's gaze to a tall boy at a nearby table, who was rising from his seat. The boy exchanged a word with a girl beside him, who slung her bag over her shoulder as they began out of the hall.

Regulus fell into step behind the pair Bastien had pointed out, trailing them through the vast, maze-like corridors of the palace. Morning light poured through tall, arched windows, casting intricate patterns on the polished marble floors, and the scent of wax and lavender lingered faintly in the air.

After several turns, they arrived at a set of ornate double doors engraved with swirling patterns of stars and potion vials. The girl

pushed them open, revealing the Philosophical Potions classroom.

The room was a strange mix of a traditional potion-making room – a bit like the Dungeons at Hogwarts but on ground level – and some kind of library. At the front of the space, a long wooden table served as the demonstration area, cluttered with neatly arranged potion ingredients and a few simmering cauldrons. Then, instead of the stiff rows of desks Regulus was used to, there were clusters of armchairs and low tables scattered across the space, while the walls were lined with bookshelves.

Many seats were already occupied, so Regulus quietly moved to the back of the room, taking an armchair at an empty table. Students around him were speaking in low voices – he caught snippets of French, English and German.

Then, at last, the professor entered the room. Regulus recognised him from breakfast; rather short, grey hair, a neatly trimmed beard. He looked inviting and wise, shooting Regulus a warm smile on his way to the front of the room. Just before the Professor was to start, the classroom door opened once again, and Regulus saw the group from breakfast entering – the two blokes and two girls. The dark-haired boy who had locked eyes with him earlier was smirking as he strode in.

“Ah,” the boy said, his smirk widening. “The *nouveau*. I suppose we’ll sit with you.”

Regulus, self-conscious under the gaze of the small group, nodded. The other bloke was also tall, his hair as brown as his eyes. He looked more inviting than the other one. The two girls looked at Regulus with interest; both were pretty – one blond and the other a fiery redhead. Regulus was positive that Barty and Evan would die with envy if they knew he was seated with them – sure, they weren’t as pretty as Isa, but they would definitely be considered fit.

“Hi,” the blonde girl said in accented but polished English, smiling brightly. “I’m Solène. This is Élise,” she gestured to the redhead, “Lucien,” the brown-haired boy, “and Maxim.” She nodded toward the smirking one.

“Nice to meet you,” Regulus replied, polite but slightly stiff. “I’m Regulus Black.”

Solène tilted her head, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “From *the* Black family, I suppose?”

Regulus raised an eyebrow. Were there any other Black families she could possibly be referring to? “Yes,” he answered simply.

Élise smiled at him, her tone friendly. “Nice to meet you, Regulus.”

“At last,” Maxim said, switching to French as he looked at the girls, “someone who doesn’t faint at the sight of you two.”

“Good morning, students,” the professor began, his tone both calm and commanding. “Welcome to another year of *Philosophical Potions*.”

The class quieted instantly, all attention turning to the front. The professor continued, his voice rich with a hint of humour. “I trust you all had a pleasant summer, but now it’s time to get back to work.” He paused, scanning the room before his eyes settled on Regulus.

“We have a new face among us this year,” he said, gesturing to Regulus. “Mr. Regulus Black, from Hogwarts.”

Regulus felt every eye in the room turn toward him, and he resisted the urge to sink further into his chair. He gave a short nod of acknowledgment, keeping his expression neutral.

The professor continued. “This term, we will be exploring potions that alter the mind — temporarily, of course. Every three weeks, we’ll study a new potion in depth: first its brewing process, then its history, ethical implications, and notable uses.”

He glanced at the blackboard, where swirling lines of text began to appear on their own. “These potions are not only about mastering technique but also about understanding their impact. Some can soothe anxiety or enhance memory, while others have been misused with disastrous consequences. Our goal is to brew, analyse, and debate their place in magical practice.”

Regulus was completely immersed by the professor’s lecture – he gave a small overview of potions they were going to deal with; Confundus Potion, Intuition Elixir, Somnus Serum… This was *brilliant*.

They were going to focus on Somnus Serum first – a potion that induced a deeply meditative state, often used to enhance mental clarity while reducing physical awareness. Regulus could already think of tons of philosophical debates around disconnecting the mind from the body and had a hard time hiding his eagerness.

The professor conjured the instructions on the blackboard with a flick

of his wand and then instructed them to start brewing. He handed over a new copy of the course book – in English – and instructed the students at Regulus's table to help him with finding his way around the classroom and the cupboards.

Regulus thought the potion wasn't that hard to brew – there were some instructions that didn't completely align with what they were supposed to do according to the book, so he was debating whether to follow the instructions neatly or improvise a bit. The hardest part, however, was that Maxim, Lucien, Solène and Élise clearly didn't know he understood French *and* were analysing Regulus's every move. And, on top of that, they somehow felt the need to narrate all their observations, making Regulus *very* self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"You think he's smart?" Maxim asked his friends in French.

"He's a Black, isn't he?" Lucien shrugged. "He has to be."

Regulus kept his head down, pretending to be entirely engrossed in the book. He scanned the brewing instructions quickly, noting the ingredients required, and instead of fumbling through the cupboard as the professor had suggested, he nonverbally summoned each item with a subtle wave of his wand.

"Non-verbal spells," Maxim muttered, eyes narrowing as he exchanged glances with Solène. "He's showing off, no?"

"Not bad," Élise added, studying Regulus with curiosity.

Regulus caught their stares out of the corner of his eye but feigned obliviousness. He lined up the ingredients with precise care, starting to prepare them with an efficiency that bordered on second nature. As he worked, Lucien whispered something about the technique for chopping valerian roots, which Regulus ignored, dicing them perfectly on his own.

By the time the others at his table had gathered their ingredients, Regulus already had his cauldron simmering at just the right temperature, his wandwork fluid and controlled.

"He works fast," Solène observed in French, her tone admiring.

Maxim smirked. "Fast doesn't mean good. He'll probably mess up."

By the time the professor wandered by their table to inspect their progress, however, it was clear that Regulus was well ahead. His

potion had taken on the faint silvery hue described in the textbook — something none of the others had managed yet.

“Excellent, Mr. Black,” the professor praised, leaning in to inspect his potion.. “You clearly have a knack for potions.”

Lucien raised an eyebrow at Maxim, whose expression was a mix of irritation and awe.

As the class drew to a close, the professor clapped his hands, summoning the students’ attention. “Well done today! Remember, this potion requires careful nurturing over the next few days to reach its full potential. Those who haven’t yet achieved the proper consistency, don’t worry — you’ll have another chance tomorrow.”

The students began packing up their supplies, their chatter filling the room once more.

“You think it’s because of the crushed valerian root?” Maxim asked his friends, clearly annoyed at not being able to pinpoint the reason why his potion hadn’t turned the right colour. “Did you guys add it before or after stirring counter-clockwise?”

“I did it before – but I’m not sure whether it’s correct,” Élise answered.

Regulus, still packing up his stuff, didn’t look up when he answered Maxim’s question – in fluent French.

“You have to add it after. Adding it too early will neutralise the effect of the lavender essence.”

All four of them froze and fell silent, realising that Regulus had understood all of their previous exchanges.

“You... speak French?” Maxim asked, blinking.

Regulus shot him a short nod. “Obviously.”

And with that, he exited the classroom.

*****

The other classes that day were very interesting too; especially *Social & Political Philosophy* with Thorne. They focused on different political systems across Europe, with discussions tailored to the diverse backgrounds of the students. Apparently there were students in class with a German, Swiss, French and British heritage; resulting in all the

students launching into a debate about the different political systems in these countries, their electoral workings and so forth. Regulus hadn't chipped in much, but rather took in all the information his fellow students offered and the stances they seemed to take ideologically in reference to the countries' systems.

Thorne hadn't let on to the other students that he and Regulus were acquainted with each other. He had, however, asked Regulus to stay behind after class, wherafter they set a meeting for the *Pure Quill* on Thursday; Regulus had planned it after Quidditch practice on purpose. Potter would probably linger at Hogwarts a while with his friends, making it less obvious that Regulus was spending some time in a professor's office.

It turned out that Maxim, Lucien, Solène and Élise made for rather enjoyable company; Maxim had gone to great lengths to let Regulus feel included; perhaps because of the unfortunate situation during Philosophical Potions. Regulus wasn't really sure whether it was out of pity or because he realised Regulus rivalled him in intelligence, but alas. It was clear, though, that the group was popular and clearly looked up to by other students; they were all in their last year, meaning they were eighteen and would even turn nineteen that academic year, and they all carried an air of sophistication and intelligence, their traditional backgrounds clearer than ever.

With Potter clearly having befriended Théo, Bastien and the girl from breakfast, Regulus's group of friends at Beauxbatons was a sealed deal; they were seated together during lunch and dinner, and even showed him to the extraordinary library during an hour off. It was nice to be surrounded by a group of people that clearly shared the same kind of upbringing *and* was intellectually challenging. The older years at Hogwarts – Dolohov and Lestrange – had had the same kind of upbringing, but clearly weren't sophisticated or intellectual in any sort. So, Regulus actually found himself fond of the small group at Beauxbatons.

That evening after dinner, Regulus found himself sprawled onto the sofa in their dorm, the course book for *Political & Social Philosophy* on his lap, the fireplace crackling softly.

He was just overthinking all the information offered in Thorne's class when he was distracted by the sound of the door to the bathroom opening, followed by light footsteps. Glancing up, Regulus froze.

Potter was emerging from the bathroom, hair damp and unruly, water

still trailing lazily down his collarbone. Now, the sight of Potter with wet hair was already enough to make Regulus swallow down a surge of heat flooding his body, but the sight of him in nothing but a towel slung low around his lips, well, that was enough to have his heart skipping a beat.

Shutting his eyes to steady himself, he quickly redirected his gaze back to his book, though the words on the page now swam uselessly.

“Long day, Black?” Potter asked cheerfully, completely oblivious to the torment he was inflicting as he rummaged through his trunk. Regulus could feel him lingering annoyingly at the edge of his peripheral vision, all damp skin and reckless confidence.

“Yeah,” Regulus managed, clearing his throat and keeping his eyes firmly on the text. He didn’t dare look up until the rustle of fabric and the soft thud of a closing trunk assured him that Potter had mercifully dressed.

Oh, *the cruelty* of sharing a dorm with Potter.

“So, how were classes?” Potter asked, now sprawled casually on his bed in his pyjamas, his hair still a halo of damp chaos.

Regulus shrugged, closing his book with deliberate care. “Interesting. A lot of debating. How about you?”

“Alright,” Potter replied, grinning. “Especially Transmutation. It’s *wild* – we’re working on transformations I didn’t even know were possible. It’s like magic magic, you know?”

Regulus arched a brow but didn’t comment, standing to stretch before heading to his bed.

As he climbed into bed and pulled the blankets over himself, Potter’s voice cut through the quiet.

“Met some interesting people today, huh?” he asked casually, his tone just light enough to make Regulus suspicious.

Regulus turned his head slightly – despite the fact that Potter couldn’t see him – frowning. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” Potter said, far too innocently, his grin audible. “Just that you’ve been the topic of some very lively discussion in certain circles. You seem to have made quite an impression on the

Beauxbatons girls."

Regulus exhaled sharply through his nose, unimpressed. "You mean they've been gossiping."

"Admiring, I'd say." Potter's voice turned teasing, and there was the sound of him shifting to sit up on his bed. "I might've overheard a certain blonde describing you as *mysterious* and *brooding*. Very romantic, really."

Regulus groaned. "Fantastic. Please do write to the Prophet."

"And then," Potter continued, undeterred, "there was a girl — brunette, glasses — who couldn't stop swooning over your eyes. Said they were *hypnotic*, if I remember right."

Regulus stiffened slightly, unsure if he was annoyed, flattered, or some confusing combination of both.

"Personally," Potter added, his voice taking on a thoughtful lilt, "I'd have gone for your cheekbones. They're practically lethal."

Regulus's lips twitched despite himself, though he fought to keep his expression neutral. "Go to sleep, Potter."

Potter laughed, low and warm. "You're no fun, Black."

With a huff, Regulus buried himself deeper under the blankets, resolutely ignoring the warmth spreading through his chest. Moments later, Potter turned off the light with his wand, leaving the room in darkness, save for the faint glow of the embers in the fireplace.

"Goodnight, Black," Potter said softly, the teasing edge replaced with something gentler.

Regulus didn't reply, though a ghost of a smile lingered on his face as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 6: Of Parchment & Surrender

Chapter Notes

A longer chapter, here we go ;)

The rest of Regulus's first week at Beauxbatons was noteworthy for many, *many* reasons.

His classes were brilliant – one topic more interesting than the last, and with his new friends – sharp and inquisitive – he found himself intellectually challenged to a degree that had his mind spinning at night; although, truth to be told, much of the spinning in his head as he lay in bed had less to do with academic rigour and more with Potter's inescapable presence, only feet away.

Regulus dutifully casted a silencing charm every evening to prevent Potter from witnessing the likely shouting and tossing, but, unsurprisingly, Potter didn't give much about his own privacy. Regulus found himself hyper-aware of the rhythm of Potter's breathing: steady and deep when he slept, vibrant and quick when he was awake. It was maddening — the intimacy of knowing something so trivial, yet so personal as the pace of Potter's breathing.

Even with meals generally spent with their respective friend groups, Regulus often found himself with Potter; either in the dorm, or outside as Potter dragged Regulus out onto the expansive Beauxbatons grounds.

The grounds were breathtaking, especially in the warm glow of early autumn evenings; the air smelled of wildflowers and the humidity of the nearby lake. Potter had made it his life goal to explore as much of the palace and its grounds as possible in his free time, although Regulus hadn't yet accompanied him on one of these quests; apart from some reading on the grounds and a walk around the lake, he hadn't seen much yet.

Next to this, they naturally had Quidditch training together. Now, Regulus was thankful for the opportunity to see his Hogwarts friends on a regular basis – both the training sessions before the weekend all his friends had showed up in the stands, cheering and exchanging news and banter. Potter had clearly been a bit annoyed by this; the team was still finding its rhythm and the presence of the rowdy Slytherins didn't really help the case, but he had let it slide it so far.

Still – Regulus couldn't help but feel *very* awkward in general by Quidditch training. It was strange and a bit surreal to step back into the pattern of who he and Potter were and who they were supposed to be to each other once at Hogwarts, and then snapping out of it once they exited Beaumont's fireplace; like switching from one version of himself to another depending on the place he found himself in.

And well, add a clearly annoyed Sirius to it – who also very openly claimed all Potter's attention whenever he could, now that he had to miss his dearest friend so much – and the craziness of the situation was really incomparable.

So, on Thursday evening, after another uncomfortable Quidditch training *and* his meeting with Thorne about the *Pure Quill* , it took some time for Regulus to shake off the odd feelings when he lay in his bed. Potter returned late – explaining to Beaumont that he had some extra skill to teach one of the team mates, which was just a pretext for Potter being allowed to stay at Hogwarts longer so he could catch up with Sirius – but happy as ever.

"Sleeping, Black?" Potter's voice broke the silence of the nearly dark dormitory.

Regulus exhaled a sigh, trying to push the last of the tension from his body. "Nah."

"Good," Potter said with a smile in his voice. Regulus could practically hear it. "I have a plan."

"A plan?"

"Yes," Potter said, his tone full of mischievous energy. "So apparently, it's just you, me, and Khan who are free on Friday afternoons."

"Really? Why?"

"The others have some career-building subject every week. They didn't feel the need to bother us with that." Potter paused, clearly pleased. "Thank Merlin."

Regulus couldn't help but smirk at that.

"So," Potter continued, clearly excited, "I was thinking we could explore the grounds tomorrow. The weather's still nice."

Regulus, realising he didn't really have anything to do anyway – his

homework was finished, the newest *Pure Quill* written – shrugged. Roaming the grounds with Potter would probably be fun.

“Alright. Why not.” Regulus sighed, the edge of a reluctant smile pulling at his lips.

Potter’s voice brightened, and Regulus could hear the grin in it. “Perfect. It’s going to be an adventure.”

*****

It wasn’t that much of an *adventure* as Potter had put it, but it had been a very memorable afternoon nonetheless. After their morning classes and lunch, they went outside to the grounds of Beauxbatons that stretched endlessly before them, bathed in the golden glow of the autumn afternoon.

Potter walked ahead, as usual, full of restless energy, while Regulus trailed slightly behind, his pace unhurried. He preferred to stroll peacefully – unlike Potter, who seemed to think the grounds might run away from him if he didn’t dart about like an overexcited child.

“You’re dragging, Black,” Potter called, turning to walk backward so he could face him. “Come on. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

Regulus snorted. “You can hardly call this an *adventure*, Potter – a stroll across the Beauxbatons grounds.”

“With all the magic you’re surrounded by,” Potter said, shaking his head mockingly, “and you can’t even adequately appreciate it. Tragic, really.”

Regulus rolled his eyes at Potter’s exaggerated enthusiasm.

“So I reckon you’re very acquainted with Hogwarts’ grounds too, then?” he asked as he caught up with him.

Potter smirked. “Yes — I know every inch by heart.”

Regulus rolled his eyes again, but a smile tugged at his lips. “Of course you do.”

They wandered farther, past wildflower-strewn meadows and a copse of trees, until an unknown side of the lake came into view. The water was serene, glittering as if it were covered in tiny jewels. The shoreline was quiet, the soft lapping of the water the only sound.

Potter stopped abruptly, his eyes lighting up. “Ah, so this is what it looks like from the other side. Perfect.”

Regulus froze and eyed him warily. “Perfect for what?”

“For swimming, obviously.”

Regulus crossed his arms, scepticism written across his face. “Funny, Potter.”

Potter shrugged off his robe, already unbuttoning his shirt. “Not at all. It’s warm enough, and look at it — it’s practically begging for it.”

Regulus blinked, suddenly aware that Potter really wasn’t joking. “I’ll pass.”

“Of course you will,” Potter said, rolling his eyes but with a mischievous grin. “Afraid your beautiful hair gets wet, Black?”

“Well, Potter,” Regulus countered dryly. “Some of us have hair that can actually still be saved.”

Potter immediately ran a hand through his messy hair, shooting Regulus a sarcastic look. But then — Regulus should have known, should have been warned by that sudden twinkling in Potter’s eyes — he broke into a smirk that made Regulus’s stomach twist in a way he wasn’t ready to deal with and before Regulus could react, Potter flicked his wand with casual precision, summoning Regulus’s wand straight into his own hand with a smug flourish.

“Potter,” Regulus growled in indignation, but Potter had already darted toward the water, laughing as he tossed the wand just beyond the shallows.

“You want it back?” Potter called, his grin wide and teasing as he began stripping down to his boxers. Regulus froze, his irritation momentarily overshadowed by the sight of Potter’s toned chest and the way the fabric of his boxers clung to his hips. The water rippled around Potter’s legs as he waded in deeper, holding Regulus’s wand just above the surface. “Come get it, Black, or it’s going under.”

“You’re *insufferable*,” Regulus snapped, but even as the words left his mouth, he couldn’t help but stifle a small smirk at Potter’s characteristic disarming cheerfulness. The bloke really found humour in *everything* in life.

“And yet, here I am.” Potter flashed him a challenging grin, dunking the wand lower into the water.

Regulus sighed, inevitability settling over him. Muttering under his breath, he began to undress, stripping down to his shirt and boxers. With a resigned glare at Potter, he stepped into the lake, shivering slightly as the cold water lapped at his skin.

By the time he was chest-deep, Potter was practically beaming. “See?” he said triumphantly, still holding the wand hostage. “The water’s nice!”

“You’re a menace,” Regulus grumbled, shaking the water off his wand and slipping his wand into the waistband of his boxers for safekeeping.

Potter, naturally, couldn’t leave it at that and with an impish grin, he splashed a wave of water at Regulus, laughing as he sputtered in indignation.

“Lighten up, Black,” Potter teased. “Nothing better than a dip in the lake to unwind from a week of classes.”

It turned out Potter was right – in his own ridiculous way. The cool water was refreshing, and soon enough, they were both diving under, splashing each other, and laughing so hard that their sides ached. It reminded him of the Quidditch screenings at Hogwarts; the way Potter managed to pull unrestrained laughter from Regulus at the most stupid things and antics, having him forget all in the world, focused only on the here and now. Potter could call the Beauxbatons grounds ‘magic’, but for Regulus this was it – the joy, the boundless laughing – this was magic.

Eventually, exhausted and exhilarated, they dragged themselves onto the shore, collapsing onto the warm grass. The sun soaked into their damp skin, and the world around them was blissfully quiet save for the rustle of leaves and the distant ripple of the lake. Regulus glanced at Potter who lay back in his boxers, utterly unbothered, stretching his arms over his head. Regulus felt a mix of jealousy and appreciation at Potter’s carefree attitude; he was both envious of and disgruntled by Potter’s life philosophy.

Potter must have felt his gaze because he turned to look at Regulus, his expression thoughtful. “Why’d you keep it on?”

Regulus blinked, confusion flickering across his face.

Potter pressed further. “The shirt – you left it on. Why?”

Regulus shrugged and turned his gaze to the lake. “Does it matter?”

Potter sat up, leaning forward on his elbows, his gaze intense. “It’s the scars, isn’t it?”

Regulus stiffened but didn’t respond – which was probably enough an answer for Potter. He was right, though; ever since Christmas, he had gone out of his way to hide his back from everyone. He’d change clothes privately, avoid baths with others, and never walked bare-backed like his dorm mates often did.. The idea of his friends seeing his defiled body – sure, it was defiled in so many more ways, reaching far beyond what the eyes could catch, but for his friends to get a glimpse of that; no – that was unbearable.

Potter nodded and his voice softened, becoming more gentle. “You shouldn’t feel ashamed of them,” he said. “And well — I’ve seen them already, haven’t I? Touched them, even. And they were probably worse back then.”

Regulus swallowed hard, his throat tightening at the memory of Potter applying the Numbing Cream to his back, and how it had hurt beyond comparison. “They don’t fade,” he said, his voice thick with emotion and barely audible.

Potter sighed, his gaze unwavering. “I know. I’ve seen Sirius’s.”

They were silent for a long moment before Potter spoke again, his tone surprisingly tender. “The sun’s good for scars, you know. Helps with healing.”

Regulus nodded, though he wasn’t sure what to say to that, but somehow — the moment, the way Potter spoke — he was tempted to at least try.

He shifted, trying to peel his damp shirt off, but it clung to his torso like a second skin, making it hard to remove. He tugged at it awkwardly, the fabric resisting.

“Here, let me help,” Potter said softly. Before Regulus could react, Potter was close, his breath warm against Regulus’s neck as he carefully pulled the shirt over his head. The motion was gentle, but it made Regulus feel acutely aware of how close they were.

The air between them crackled with an intensity that sent a strange

shiver down Regulus's spine. He could feel Potter's breath against his skin, could sense his proximity in a way that made everything seem heightened.

And then, as if sensing the weight of the moment, Potter stepped back with an easy grin and flopped onto the grass. He sprawled out on his back, arms wide, a contented sigh escaping his lips. "Feels good, doesn't it?" he said, smirking as he began wriggling around, making exaggerated snow angels in the grass.

Regulus blinked at him, the absurdity of the sight cutting through the tension. A laugh burst out of him, unbidden and genuine. "You're ridiculous, Potter," he said, but he lay down beside him anyway, copying his movements.

Together, they made lopsided grass angels, the autumn sunlight warming their skin.

"But yeah, it does, actually," Regulus admitted after a moment, his voice soft.

He turned his head to glance at Potter, who was grinning up at the sky like a child, carefree and unburdened. Regulus thought, fleetingly, how strange it was that he felt so safe, so secure around him. Small gestures, small acts – seemingly so trivial, yet shaping something so grand.

*****

Apart from the fact that Potter seemed to unlock a level of joy in Regulus he hadn't known existed — laughter that came so easily it almost startled him — there were moments when the air shifted, laughter trailing into something heavier. It was the moments that silence fell between them and Regulus had to swallow at the intense gaze in Potter's eyes, or the moments that Potter looked at him in contemplation, biting his lip, or the moments that Potter leaned carelessly against a wall, twirling his wand between his fingers and laughing at a stupid joke he himself had made. It was these moments that the closeness to Potter felt both thrilling and suffocating – giving a glimpse of what he wanted so badly, almost letting him *feel* it, before brutally yanking it away from him, leaving him more desperate than ever. It was these moments particularly, that Regulus had to suppress the urge to repeat their encounter in Hogwarts' antechamber – shove Potter against the wall and kiss him so desperately that he'd taste him on his lips for days.

Still, it wasn't just that what drew him to Potter – there was something else about him, something that intrigued him, pulling him in like a riddle he couldn't solve. Beneath his relentless cheerfulness there was a simmering complexity; a quiet intelligence stretching much further than Potter let on. Potter was curious to the point of restlessness, always exploring, always searching – although Regulus wasn't quite sure of what.

Besides this, there was something secretive about him – he'd sometimes fall silent mid-sentence, he'd whisper secretly through the mirror with Sirius, he'd sometimes look protective over the weirdest things. Regulus couldn't pinpoint it, nor could he rationalise it because it was almost impossible, but something told him that the Prefect being a werewolf was only the tip of the iceberg of the secrets Potter held.

So, when after dinner, after a quick shower, Regulus entered the dorm in his comfortable wear, his gaze immediately landed on Potter, who was lounging on his bed, observed in a piece of parchment. Now, the fact that Potter was reading wasn't that interesting – but there was something off with Potter's face; a mixture of intent focus and something Regulus could almost read as mischief. Again, Regulus couldn't pinpoint it, but there was something that piqued his curiosity.

Now, had Potter shrugged and offered Regulus to read the piece of parchment, claiming it wasn't anything interesting, Regulus would've probably believed him and declined the offer.

The fact that Potter did do exactly the opposite, made his attempt to conceal something and to avert Regulus's interest very futile.

Regulus leaned against the bathroom door. "What've you got there, Potter?" he asked, his voice a touch too casual.

Potter looked up, eyes widening for the briefest moment, his fingers tightening on the parchment as he slipped it behind his back. "Nothing that concerns you, Black."

Potter threw him a cheeky grin, but Regulus wasn't fooled – there was something about this piece of parchment *and* Potter's eyes clearly didn't meet his smirk.

Regulus narrowed his eyes, suppressing a smirk. "Is that so?" Inspired by Potter's antics at the lake, Regulus raised his wand. "Accio–"

Regulus was once again reminded of Potter's astonishingly quick reflexes, as, before Regulus could finish, Potter had flicked his own wand – Merlin knew where Potter had pulled it from even – and disarmed Regulus in a swift, fluid movement. Regulus felt his wand slip from his grasp, flying across the room to his own bed, leaving him unarmed.

Very disgruntled by the fact that Potter had overmastered him so effortlessly, Regulus decided to not let him go off easily. He feigned surrender, pretending to walk towards his own alcove to retrieve his wand, but then instead, all of a sudden, jumped into Potter's alcove and lunged forward reaching for the parchment.

Again, Potter's reflexes came quickly and in an instant, they were tangled together, arms grappling as Regulus tried to wrest the parchment for Potter's grip. They stumbled onto Potter's bed, a tangled mess of limbs and elbows as they fought for the upper hand, neither willing to yield. Regulus's fingers brushed the edge of the parchment, but Potter twisted, blocking him, and then – then his face was merely inches from Potter's.

Abruptly, they stilled – Regulus became aware of just how close they were, their faces inches apart, their breaths mingling. Potter's eyes were on him, piercing and intense, and Regulus could feel every heartbeat in his chest.

So much temptation had he suppressed, had he overcome, had he been able to ignore – but this, the intensity of Potter's eyes, the warmth of his breath… And when something in Potter's gaze softened, a flicker of desire flashing across his face, Regulus's heart thundered as he felt his own control slipping – it simply was too much.

So he surrendered.

It was Regulus who eventually closed the gap between them, pressing Potter into the mattress, pressing his lips on his. The kiss was rough, almost desperate, an explosion of so much desire and temptation bottled up – Potter's mouth softened under his, opening, and suddenly, they were kissing deeper, Regulus's hard gripping Potter's shoulder, pulling him possibly even closer.

Potter responded with an intensity that literally took Regulus's breath away; his hands moving up to hold Regulus firmly, his breath shuddering against Regulus's lips. He felt Potter's mouth part further and then his tongue was against his – warm and insistent – sending a

shock through Regulus's entire body. Regulus gasped, tilting his head to meet Potter, surrendering every last bit of resistance to the heat that swept over him. Their kiss grew deeper, slower but no less fervent, their bodies pressing closer, touching everywhere, every nerve in Regulus' body alight.

Regulus broke away for a moment, gasping, trying to catch his breath, but Potter's hand came up to cradle the side of his face, pulling him back, his thumb tracing over his cheek as he kissed him again, softer this time, the gentleness unexpected but somehow making his pulse race faster.

"We shouldn't—" Regulus gasped out, feeling the words leave his mouth even as he leaned in again, pressing their lips together, unwilling to let go of this overwhelming heat.

"Why not?" Potter's voice was low and rough, his mouth moving to Regulus' jaw, brushing his skin with soft, lingering kisses that made it impossible to think clearly.

"Because," Regulus whispered, but his hands were traitors, clutching at Potter's shoulders, holding him close. "It's wrong."

"Does it feel wrong?" Potter asked, pulling back just enough to meet Regulus' gaze, his eyes warm and full of intensity.

"No," Regulus admitted, his hands sliding up to the back of Potter's neck, his voice barely above a whisper as he kissed him again, deeper, fiercer, letting himself forget everything else.

It didn't feel wrong in the slightest – on the contrary, it felt as if he was finally doing exactly what he had to do, what he was born to do, was born to feel. Every part of his body felt ignited and alive, every nerve a testament to all that mattered in life, to what life was supposed to feel like.

But eventually, reality began to creep back in, and they pulled apart, still tangled together, breathing hard as they stared at each other, a flicker of panic lighting up in Regulus's mind.

"What are we doing, Potter?" he managed, his voice fragile, almost a whisper.

Potter held his gaze, the honesty in his eyes a mixture of vulnerability and something fierce. "I don't know," he replied, voice raw. "But I can't stay away from you."

Regulus looked away, his mind still grappling with the reality of it. “We shouldn’t – I’m Regulus Black, you’re James Potter,” he whispered, the names feeling heavy between them, a reminder of all that should be keeping them apart – not just a man and a man, also Potter and a Black – so many reasons why they shouldn’t, why they couldn’t, why they mustn’t…

Potter’s hand moved, brushing against Regulus’ arm, grounding him. “I know,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. He shifted, lying beside Regulus now, their arms touching, their bodies still close but no longer pressing into one another. The air between them seemed charged, electric.

Potter sighed. “I – I don’t know,” he whispered, “but – something that feels like this can’t be … can’t be wrong.” Potter turned his head, his breath warm against Regulus’s cheek, sending a shiver through him. “Something this pure… this real… it just can’t be wrong.”

Regulus closed his eyes for a moment, willing himself to resist the pull – to remember all the reasons why this was a mistake. But then Potter leaned closer, pressing a kiss to his neck, just below his ear.

Oh.

Regulus’ breath hitched, his resistance crumbling. Potter’s lips trailed along his jaw, slow and deliberate, before finding his mouth again.

Their next kiss was unrestrained, intense, and impossibly consuming. Potter’s hands moved to cradle Regulus’s face, thumbs brushing against his skin with maddening tenderness. Regulus didn’t just kiss him back — he poured every ounce of his conflicted emotions into it: his frustration, his desire, his need.

“We can’t…” Regulus tried to say when they broke apart briefly, but Potter cut him off with another kiss, his lips firm and insistent, his hand sliding down to the small of Regulus’ back.

“Let’s forget it all,” Potter murmured, his voice hoarse and full of conviction. “Forget the names, the heritage, the politics.” He kissed Regulus again, slower this time, drawing a low, involuntary sound from him. “Let’s just… focus on this. The rest can wait.”

Regulus wanted to argue, wanted to point out how foolish, how dangerous this was. But every time Potter kissed him, the words dissolved on his tongue. The heat of Potter’s touch, the sheer weight of his presence, made it impossible to think clearly.

Eventually, the protests died completely, replaced by a soft moan as Regulus gave in. He tangled his fingers in Potter's hair, pulling him closer, their bodies pressing together once more. The night blurred into a series of moments – kisses turned into quiet laughter, whispered words, a form of intimacy that Regulus had never witnessed, had never known he was capable of.

They lay sprawled across Potter's bed, limbs entwined, their breathing slowing as the urgency faded into something gentler. Potter rested his head on Regulus' chest, his fingers tracing absent patterns on his side.

"I didn't expect you to be a cuddler, Black," Potter teased, his voice muffled but warm.

"Shut up, Potter," Regulus muttered, but his hand betrayed him, brushing through Potter's hair in a soft, almost absentminded motion.

Potter chuckled, the sound vibrating through Regulus's chest. The warmth of it, the sheer normalcy of the moment – it felt almost surreal.

Regulus closed his eyes, letting Potter's quiet chatter wash over him. Potter talked about Quidditch, about his ludicrous plans for exploring the entirety of the Beauxbatons' grounds, and Regulus only half listened – completely swept away, completely immersed by the feeling of Potter settling against him. Regulus's breath grew steady and even, and he slowly drifted off to sleep, his hand still in Potter's hair, feeling a level of peace that he let himself completely savour.

Yes, this is what mattered in life. This is what life was supposed to feel like.

*****

The next morning, Regulus woke to an overwhelming warmth – it reminded him of Damascus without cooling spells during the height of summer. Was the fireplace on? Because he wasn't in Damascus – wasn't beneath the sweltering Middle Eastern sun – he was in… France.

As consciousness slowly returned, so did the memories in vivid detail. The lake. The wrestling. The endless, heated kissing…

He froze. For a moment, he was almost afraid to open his eyes. What if it had all been a dream?

Taking a deep breath, he cautiously cracked his eyes open.

It turned out, there was another very valid reason to be cautious.

Potter's brown eyes were staring directly into his, barely inches away, wide-awake and filled with a mischievous spark. Regulus' breath hitched in surprise, his body tensing instinctively.

Shit, did Potter startle him.

"Don't do that, Potter," Regulus groaned, wincing as he pressed the heel of his palm to his temple. "That's bloody scary."

"Good morning to you too," Potter said with a grin, propping himself up on one elbow, clearly amused by Regulus's discomfort. "Did I scare you? Sorry," he added, though the twinkle in his eye said he wasn't sorry at all. His grin softened into something warmer as he trailed off, "didn't want to miss the chance of seeing your eyes first thing in the morning."

Regulus groaned again, louder this time, and dropped back against the pillow. "Merlin," he said. "It isn't enough for you to be so unhealthily cheerful — you've got to be cheesy now too?"

Potter let out a bark of laughter, his hair falling across his forehead in a mess. "Ah – deep down you like it, Black. I never took you for a hugger too and well, here we are, having spooned the entire night."

Regulus groaned, but couldn't find a witty answer and then realised it was Saturday. "What time is practise?"

"In an hour," Potter replied breezily, though his gaze was far from casual, lingering as it trailed over Regulus' hair and face.

"Then *why* are you awake already?"

"Well, I'm the Captain, am I not?" Potter said matter-of-factly. "I have to set an example and have breakfast – and have to force my players into having breakfast, too."

"How much do you *plan* on eating if it takes you an hour?" Regulus groaned.

"Ah, Black," Potter said, his voice dropping into a low, amused tone, his eyes glittering with mischief. "That's where you're wrong. I didn't plan an hour for breakfast."

Regulus frowned, puzzled. “Then what—?”

Potter leaned closer, brushing a dark curl out of Regulus’ face with surprising tenderness. “I planned on spending at least half of the time doing this.”

Before Regulus could process the words, Potter tilted his head and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

For a moment, Regulus hesitated – the previous night had been unbelievable, incredible – but to start the day like this… it somehow made it all more official. But then he realised that perhaps that ship had sailed, and well, it was too bloody early to fight temptation anyway.

So, with a quiet sigh in surrender, his hands found their way around Potter, pressing him closer as his tongue met his.

Damn irresistible Potter.

*****

Now, Potter might have woken very cheerfully and cheekily – he lost most of that once training started. Regulus couldn’t really blame him – he too had to find his footing in this strange, new situation and well, he wasn’t even the Captain.

It wasn’t *just* that though – yes, it was undeniably bizarre to step into Dumbledore’s office through the fireplace knowing they’d just snogged the living daylights out of each other and had fallen asleep in the same bed the previous night, *cuddling*. And yes, it was surreal to revert to a dynamic where they were supposed to be nothing more than Captain and Seeker. But things got even stranger when Sirius entered the mix.

Sirius, who already wasn’t thrilled about Regulus being on the team, now had to face his little brother regularly — confronting not just him but also everything he’d left behind. And to make matters worse, he was surrounded by the person he had turned to instead; a forced mix of the brother he’d lost, and the brother he’d gained.

Sirius, caught in the limbo of trying to protect some imaginary privacy line between his friends and his family, between his chosen future and his past. Regulus was fairly certain Sirius had given strict instructions to his friends to steer clear of him years ago — an effort to keep those two warring worlds neatly separated. But now, thanks to this new

team dynamic, those worlds collided several times a week, whether Sirius liked it or not.

If only Sirius knew how tangled those worlds really were. How deeply entwined they had become behind his back, without his knowledge...

So, yes, it wasn't surprising that Potter struggled to find his rhythm. He must have felt like he was betraying Sirius. Regulus was no stranger to betrayal himself — Isa, his friends, Mother… He carried his share of guilt. But at least he wasn't confronted with it to that extent multiple times a week on the pitch.

And as if all that wasn't enough, there was the fact that their team literally formed the heart of Quidditch at the castle that year, drawing large crowds even during practices. On the second Saturday of the term, with the weather still warm and inviting, and homework not yet piled high, the turnout in the stands was especially strong.

They had started training in the locker room – Potter in the front, notifying that they'd focus mostly on the Keeper's job today. It was a usual thing to do; focus on one or two positions in the team, and having the other positions work on their own drills or suffer through different exercises. And well, apparently, Potter had a thing for physical conditioning, so Regulus, Sirius, and Warlow – the other Beater – were left to their own devices and the stupid laps *running* around the pitch. As if the laps on the broom weren't bloody tiring enough, he was now subjected to jogging too.

Cruel.

During the explanation of that morning's training, Regulus had been in the back of the locker room, leaning against the wall, with the Keeper – Hedge – the Macmillan sisters and Warlow forming a buffer between him and Sirius and Potter. It didn't go past Regulus that Potter seemed to avert Regulus's gaze.

Yes, it was hard for Potter, with so much weight on his shoulders and then being in *this* particular situation – but well, he *had* just ordered Regulus to jog multiple laps around the pitch – so it was fair game, really.

So when Potter accidentally caught Regulus's gaze mid-explanation, a flicker of tension sparked. Regulus raised an eyebrow, challenging.

Slowly, deliberately, he licked his lips.

Potter's reaction was immediate, if subtle. He swallowed hard, the motion of his throat unmistakable, then closed his eyes briefly, as though regaining composure.

It didn't last long. Potter broke the gaze and continued the briefing with practised determination, but not before a slight flush crept up his neck.

The crowning glory for this exchange was the piercing, deadly glare that Potter shot him while they made their way onto the pitch. Regulus let out a bark of laughter.

The stands, unsurprisingly, were packed. His friends stood out as the most animated section of the crowd; Barty, Evan, Avery, and Mulciber were in their element — cheering, stomping, and steadily working their way through what looked like the entirety of Honeydukes' inventory. Barty waved a sugar quill like a banner, while Evan chanted Regulus's name with theatrical gusto. Avery was mid-laugh, slapping Mulciber on the back as if they'd already won something.

Regulus completed his first lap, his focus still on training, but by the second, he found himself drifting towards the stands. He paused in midair, hovering just close enough to be heard but far enough to keep a degree of distance.

"Enjoying yourselves?" he asked with a smirk. Why they'd bother to sit in the stands to watch someone else's training was completely beyond him.

Evan snickered, tossing a licorice wand to Barty. "Don't mind us," he called. "We're just here for moral support."

Regulus shook his head, and said dryly: "Ah, yes. Moral support. Truly vital during drills still months away from the first match."

"BLACK! THIS ISN'T A BLOODY TEA PARTY! BACK TO LAPS!" Potter's voice thundered from the centre of the pitch.

"Gotta go," Regulus said pointedly to his friends, then saluting Potter and continuing his laps.

But the antics in the stands didn't let up – if anything, the crowds grew more raucous. Word seemed to spread across the castle, and students trickled out to the pitch in droves, ostensibly for 'fresh air' but clearly for the impromptu spectacle. By the time Regulus finished his second set of laps, the stands had morphed into something

bordering a full-blown party.

Regulus, who hadn't had much to do except for all the bloody laps and catching a couple of snitches, couldn't really be bothered, but he was very aware that the rest of the team wasn't faring so well; Hedge's Keeping was shakier than usual, and even more strange – bordering at *alarming* even – Potter's playing was visibly off. Regulus wasn't sure if the crowd noticed, but to the team, it was painfully obvious.

A tad too many mistimed passes and some sloppy coordination later, Regulus sighed and did the only thing he could do.

He targeted his friends and the other fellow Slytherins first, angling his broom towards their position in the stands, hovering in front of them. "Alright guys," he said, his tone light but firm, "time to pack it up. I'll see you in the common room later."

Barty threw his head back with an exaggerated groan. "Oh, come on, Black!" he called, holding up his hands as if pleading a case.

Mulciber raised his arms, mock-indignant. "What? We're just *watching*!"

"Go on," Regulus pressed, rolling his eyes. "We can't concentrate with you breathing down our necks the entire time. I'll catch up with you in the common room after training, alright?"

With exaggerated grumbles and theatrical complaints, his friends eventually complied, making their way down the stands. Once they'd gone, Regulus turned his focus to the larger crowd scattered across the other sections of the stands.

He felt very awkward and self-conscious as he addressed so many students from other Houses, but the sight of Potter's flawed drills and the prospect of having to endure it for another hour or so was just too much to bear.

"Alright, listen up!" he called, the first words awkward and uneven. But as he pushed on, his voice steadied, taking on a commanding edge. "You want us to win this cup, don't you?"

A murmur of half-hearted agreement rippled through the students, accompanied by a few chuckles.

"Then clear out," he continued, his tone sharpening. "We can't train properly with you all shouting and messing about."

The crowd stirred, a mix of groans and protests rising. Someone from Hufflepuff called out, “It’s a free pitch!” while another Gryffindor added, “We’re just here to watch — you should be flattered!”

Regulus narrowed his eyes. “Flattered?” he repeated coolly. “Right, because that’ll be a big help when we’re fumbling plays during the match. If you actually want us to win, go do… whatever it is you lot usually do on Saturdays and let us practise.”

And then, one by one, the students began to trickle away, most laughing or groaning in reluctant agreement. By the time Regulus returned to the pitch, the stands were mercifully empty.

“We’ll need to make some rules about this with Dumbledore,” Potter said evenly, his voice low enough for Regulus’s ears alone.

Regulus nodded. “Yeah.”

The rest of training passed without incident. Without the distractions, the team sharpened their focus, their plays more precise. Potter’s performance stabilised, though there was still a tightness in his movements that hadn’t fully relaxed by the end.

When Potter dismissed them, Regulus caught the faint hesitation in his voice, as though he was searching for an excuse to hold him back. But Sirius was nearby, lingering, so Regulus nodded curtly at Potter and made his way toward the castle, feeling Potter’s eyes on his back all the way.

*****

Regulus returned to the dorm, hurriedly passing through the bustling Slytherin common room. He knew he was bound to draw some attention this year with him being sent off to Beauxbatons and being part of the Hogwarts Quidditch team, but knowing of it wasn’t really the same as being mentally prepared for it.

He pointedly ignored the whispers by the first-years and lingering glances of older years as he registered his friends sitting in their usual corner and quickly entered the empty dorm to take a shower. Afterwards, he dried off and reluctantly pulled on his Beauxbatons robes. He knew he looked way too … something in these robes – he couldn’t really name it, a bit like someone trying *too* hard to stand out. Still, he could hardly return to Beauxbatons in the Muggle clothes, so he knew he had to live with it.

When he re-entered the common room with many eyes immediately darting his way, he saw that Barty, Evan, Avery, Mulciber and Severus were still sprawled in their corner, talking over each other with exaggerated gestures and loud laughter.

Barty spotted him first, his smirk widening. He gave a low whistle. “Well, well. Look who’s back — our French prince . ”

Regulus rolled his eyes and dropped onto the sofa beside Severus, taking in the familiar chaos; textbooks scattered across the table, leftovers of a box of Every Flavour Beans and an abandoned game of Exploding Snap mid-play. It felt both odd and good to find himself back in the usual setting of his friends killing time in the common room on a Saturday afternoon.

Regulus grabbed a copy of *The Daily Prophet* — undoubtedly left there by Severus — that he hadn’t had the chance of reading yet. His eyes skimmed the front page, pausing on a shorter article tucked into the corner.

Ministry Acts to Ensure Stability in Vital Supplies

In a decisive move to safeguard the distribution of essential resources across the wizarding world, the Ministry of Magic has announced new measures to streamline the allocation of vital supplies. The initiative, which covers, among others, potions and potion ingredients, aims to address growing concerns over shortages reported by St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and leading research centres.

A spokesperson for the Ministry praised the policy as a necessary step to "ensure that all magical communities have fair and regulated access to supplies". The reforms are expected to improve efficiency and prevent potential misuse of dangerous or restricted items.

For details on how the new measures will be implemented and their expected benefits, see page 4.

The voice of Avery snapped Regulus back to the present.

“So, Black,” he said, leaning forward with mock enthusiasm. “We’ve been *dying* to hear about your glamorous life abroad.”

Regulus shook his head. “Hardly glamorous.”

Mulciber snorted, tossing a half-charred card onto the table as an explosion punctuated the end of the Snap game. “Oh, come on, Black. Bet the girls there are something else. You’ve snogged at least one, haven’t you? Or seen one naked?”

The question caught Regulus off-guard – heat rushing to his face. If his friends only knew who he had kissed like his life had depended on it, whose breath against his neck had left him shuddering and whose head had rested on his chest throughout the night…

He cleared his throat, trying to steady himself, but the hesitation didn’t go unnoticed.

“See that?” Mulciber grinned triumphantly, leaning back. “Look at him – didn’t I tell you, mates?”

Avery grinned, leaning in conspiratorially. “Come on – details, Black. Don’t leave us hanging.”

Regulus shifted very uncomfortably on the sofa, not sure what to do – either deny it or just make up a story… but if they pressed for details, what would he say? He had no experience whatsoever with girls…

Luckily, Evan came to his rescue.

“You lot are hopeless. Black doesn’t kiss and tell. Isn’t that right, Black?”

“Exactly,” Barty added, nudging Avery with a mock-serious expression. “Respect the man’s dignity.”

The uproar of laughter that followed left Regulus both relieved and exasperated. He was about to make a comment when Isa joined them. She was holding a pile of books, probably off to the library or about to do her homework in a quiet corner in the common room.

She looked between them, her expression curious.

“What’s so funny?” she asked casually, her eyes lingering on Regulus, who looked visibly flustered.

Avery, clearly not considering the implications, smirked. “Just discussing Regulus’s naked encounters with Beauxbatons girls.”

Barty and Evan looked possibly horrified by the situation. Isa’s gaze flicked to Regulus’s eyes, her expression shifting to something quieter,

more questioning. The rest, including Avery who had come to realise what he had done, fell into an awkward silence.

After a moment, Isa nodded curtly and spoke again, her voice even. “Once you’re done here, can we talk before you leave for Beauxbatons?”

Regulus nodded, standing. “Alright.”

As she walked off to a quieter corner, Avery muttered an awkward apology while Mulciber attempted to lighten the mood. “Well, mate, don’t let her guilt-trip you. You’re a free man.”

Barty, sensing the discomfort, changed the subject. “So, how long are you staying?”

“Until three,” Regulus said. “Why?”

“Ah just so we know when we have to kick out some people from our spot in the library,” Evan clarified.

Which, honestly, was hardly a clarification of *anything* because – what the hell? Barty and Evan discussing going to the *library* on a Saturday afternoon?

Voluntarily?

Regulus looked at them, shocked.

“Did I enter another dimension via the fireplace?”

Evan snorted, but couldn’t suppress the slightly smug smile on his face. “Ha ha, very funny.”

Barty rolled his eyes. “We’re serious. We’ve been working on becoming better duellers — brushing up on theory, spellwork, strategy.” Regulus arched his eyebrows. “You know – for when the revolution opens up.” He lowered his voice. “So we can fight at the Dark Lord’s side.”

“We’d wanted to include you, of course,” Evan rushed, “but well – we didn’t want to pile more onto you, since you’re already swamped with Beauxbatons, Quidditch…”

Regulus shook his head slowly, processing. “No – it’s alright, don’t worry. It’s … smart.”

It *was* smart – especially for Barty. He'd been talking about joining the revolution already from their first year on, but with his father, he'd have to prove himself more than anyone else.

"So, what have you been working on?" Regulus asked.

"Mostly working our way through jinxes, hexes," Mulciber said.

"We're going to focus on defence after," Barty added, the pride evident in his voice. "And of course Snape's diving into spell creation."

This greatly interested Regulus – crafting one's own spells… it was a very distinct, complicated art. He shot Severus an appreciative nod.

They launched into an animated discussion of the jinxes and hexes that they had covered that week until Regulus realised it was time.

He quickly scanned the common room and found Isa sitting with Amaryllis and Melania, books spread between them. Amaryllis and Melania greeted him and eyed the exchange between Regulus and Isa with much interest, their eyes gleaming with curiosity as Isa packed her things and gestured for him to follow.

She led him to his dormitory, where the uncomfortable silence between them pushed Regulus to busy himself with straightening his already-made bed. He was a bit anxious about a private conversation with her, since the last one hadn't been particularly peaceful.

Isa stood by the door, watching him, her eyes piercing.

"How's Beauxbatons?" she asked.

"It's… fine," Regulus replied, shrugging.

"You look different," she said observantly.

Regulus stiffened, then shrugged again. "Well, yes, it's a bit much, isn't it?"

Isa didn't press further. Instead, she pulled a small bag filled with vials from her bag and handed it to him.

"I brewed you a new stash. I know you can make them yourself, but well – I've become rather acquainted with your exact dosage and all…"

Regulus gave her a smile. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

Regulus could almost taste the awkwardness over their last fight in the air – Isa knowing his biggest, most painful secret, her wanting to discuss it or *do* something with it, while Regulus solely wanted to outrun all these realities.

Isa stepped back toward the door. “Take care of yourself, alright?”

“I will,” he said, watching as she left.

As the door closed behind her, Regulus stared at the bag in his hand.

And then the realisation hit him. He hadn’t taken a drop of the potion yesterday, yet he had slept better than he had in what felt like years.

Chapter 7: Of Trauma & Tasks

Chapter Notes

TW: abuse and ... mature content ;)

Strangely enough — seeing all his objections and arguments before — it wasn't the new status quo with Potter that gave Regulus a nagging feeling. Sure, he knew it was wrong – and not just wrong, it was *dangerous*; even if they'd lived in a world where him being with a bloke would be acceptable, it couldn't be *him*. It couldn't be *him* for all the people in Regulus's life; he was a blood traitor, an anti-revolutionary. It couldn't be *him* for Mother; he was the reason she'd lost her favourite son.

So wrong, *so* dangerous.

The realisation would always hit in sharp, unrelenting spikes, but apart from that, Regulus found himself remarkably adept at pushing this knowledge, these realisations to the edges of his mind. It was so surreal, so beyond comprehension, so *big* that his mind couldn't properly register it as something to fight off. Add in a heart that *did* feel all of it – in all its overwhelming, breathtaking, enlivening beauty – and which precisely because of that didn't want to fight it off, and well — there he was.

No, the unease — just below the surface, seemingly there, poking his gut and occasionally clawing at his throat but not overwhelming— was because of two other things.

First, there was the knowledge that situations like that of Regulus and Potter had a natural evolutionary path. Things could start slow, like with them – slowly finding their way towards each other, getting closer, pushing the first boundaries in the form of kissing, hugging, touching. But there'd be a moment where things would logically be expected to go beyond that, they'd be expected to make that next step, to take it to another level. And well, that realisation brought about a storm of emotions Regulus had a very hard time tackling. Sure, physically, he wanted it – when they kissed, when Potter breathed against his neck, when his hand brushed bare skin at Regulus's waist, his entire body lit up, betraying in every embarrassing way how it turned him on. He'd go to great lengths to hide it – angle himself so that it'd go by unnoticed, although he rationally knew the feeling was mutual. His body wasn't the problem – it was his mind; his mind was

the problem.

Because he was *terrified*. Terrified to the bones that it'd remind Regulus of *him.* All of that had been *his*, and his only. Sharing it with someone else, even if it was Potter – who Regulus ironically came to trust more than almost anyone – well, it filled him with dread. The knowledge that he might never enjoy it, that he'd been left broken, it tightened his throat to a level he'd forget how to breathe. Regulus knew that it showed – that he'd sometimes become more distant, less responsive, as if raising an invisible wall between them – and he knew that it bothered Potter, but he had no clue how to deal with it. He had no clue how to deal with any of this.

Then, secondly, there was the knowledge that he had to get on with his mission. The first two weeks he had spent mostly getting used to the rhythm of Beauxbatons and its classes, the horribly awkward Quidditch practises with his brother and the passionate, intimate encounters with Potter beside whom he had slept every night so far. But his presence in the palace had yielded no concrete results, and it was beginning to get on his nerves.

Especially when he was asked by Professor Thorne to stay behind after the last class of *Social & Political Philosophy* just before the second weekend at Beauxbatons.

Thorne sat perched on the edge of his desk, fingers idly tapping the wood material. His gaze trailed lazily over Regulus, settling on his eyes with unnerving precision. Regulus swallowed, awkwardly shifting on his feet. There was always something about Thorne's look — sharp, calculating, and entirely too knowing — that unsettled him. Everything gave away that he was a very good Occlumens – and although Regulus would know if his professor entered his mind, there was something disturbing about the extent to which his gaze seemed to pierce through him.

The silence stretched a beat too long, then Thorne's mouth curled into a mischievous smirk. With deliberate ease, he pulled a cigar from his pocket, lighting at the touch to his lips.

"Mr. Black," he began, his voice low and smooth. "How are you finding Beauxbatons?"

"Good, sir," Regulus replied, nodding stiffly. "Interesting, enriching."

Thorne tilted his head, exhaling a curl of smoke. "You're able to manage your… endeavours, I trust?"

Regulus's throat went dry. "Endeavours, sir?"

Thorne's smirk deepened, his eyes glinting with amusement. "Yes — the Quidditch tournament, the *Pure Quill* , O.W.L.s. Your mission…"

Regulus nodded again, slightly sighing in relief. His voice was steady despite the tension in his chest. "It's doable so far, sir."

Thorne nodded approvingly, taking another drag from the cigar. A thick plume of smoke escaped his lips as he leaned back slightly. "And how are you finding the news from home? You've been keeping up as always, I assume?"

"Yes, of course, sir," Regulus said quickly. "I'm keeping myself informed."

Thorne's smile sharpened as he studied him, the glow of the cigar's ember catching briefly in his eyes. "And? Any thoughts?"

Regulus shifted his weight uncomfortably but met Thorne's gaze. "Plenty," he replied, his voice low but firm.

Thorne chuckled, a rich sound that reverberated through the quiet room. He reached for a bottle of Butterbeer sitting on his desk and slid it toward Regulus. The label was slightly faded but still intact. "Well then, let's hear them. Sit."

Regulus took the offered bottle and perched on the edge of the nearest desk, holding the drink in his hands but not opening it. Thorne crossed one leg over the other, taking another puff from his cigar as he leaned back in expectation.

"The latest news," Regulus began, watching the lazy trails of smoke drift toward the high ceiling, "is something they've tried very hard to slip past unnoticed in the papers."

Thorne barked a laugh, sharp and approving. "Very good, Mr. Black — sharp as ever. Tell me more."

"They've been hinting at a shortage of supplies for St. Mungo's and research centres," Regulus explained, "but I think it's all bollocks. It's a move to push public support for their so-called 'streamlining of vital supplies'."

Thorne let out another low chuckle, his smile curling wider as he gestured for Regulus to continue. "Go on, then. What does this

streamlining entail?"

"The Ministry is restricting all streams of 'vital' supplies that aren't officially registered," Regulus said. "These include potions, potion ingredients, magical surveillance devices, and anything deemed dark or dangerous."

Thorne nodded approvingly, exhaling a slow stream of smoke. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that we'll have a hard time getting our hands on these."

"Very astute, Mr. Black," Thorne nodded. "Keep up the good work. Now, regarding this news… There's a meeting tomorrow."

It was silent for a second.

"And you'll be leaving with me through my office."

Regulus stiffened, his stomach knotting slightly. "A meeting already, sir?"

Thorne's gaze flicked over him again, amused and sharp. "Something troubling you, Black? You seem nervous."

Regulus hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "I don't have much information to provide yet, sir."

Thorne smiled faintly, leaning back once more. "That's to be expected. Everything is going as it should. The meeting isn't so much about you reporting as it is about you receiving new information for your mission."

*****

The next evening Regulus managed to slip away from Potter under the pretext of needing to work on a project for Social & Political Philosophy at Thorne's office, where he, in reality, used Thorne's fireplace to make his way to the grand hall of Malfoy Manor.

It was his second meeting with the Dark Lord, and he was glad that Thorne had notified who would be present, undoubtedly sensing Regulus's nerves; the gathering would be small — just Lucius, Thorne, Yaxley, and himself. Regulus knew Bellatrix held a high rank, at least equal to Yaxley's, so her absence here was likely no coincidence. The knowledge that Lucius and Cissy had gone to the lengths of excluding

her just to make him feel more comfortable sent a warmth through Regulus's body.

The last time Regulus had visited Cissy and Lucius's home over the holidays, it had been warm and inviting. Tonight, however, it felt cold and austere; the corridors were shrouded in shadows, lit only by a sparse scattering of floating candles and the silvery glow of the full moon streaming through the tall windows.

The meeting was to take place in the drawing room on the first floor. Thorne and Regulus ascended the grand staircase in complete silence, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet runner. When they reached the drawing room, the door was already open, revealing the solemn figures within.

Lucius stood near the hearth, his pale features illuminated by the flickering flames. His eyes gleamed at the sight of Regulus, though his expression remained composed and inscrutable. Nearby, Yaxley sat rigidly in a tall-backed chair, his stern gaze fixed straight ahead. The air in the room was heavy with tension and expectation. Regulus followed Professor Thorne inside, keeping his steps light and measured. His nerves buzzed beneath his skin, but he forced his expression into neutrality.

The Dark Lord sat at the head of the long ebony table. His presence was magnetic, his features unnervingly perfect — sharp cheekbones, dark, intelligent eyes that seemed to catch and hold every flicker of light. His robes flowed around him like liquid shadow, and though he sat with a kind of relaxed ease, there was no mistaking the power he radiated.

As Regulus entered, the Dark Lord turned his gaze on him, and it felt as though the entire room narrowed. Regulus quickly dipped his head, his pulse racing.

"Good evening, Regulus."

Regulus stepped forward, his movements deliberate. He kept his head slightly bowed, but not too much — he wanted to appear respectful, not subservient.

"You are adjusting well to your responsibilities, I trust?" he asked, his tone conversational but layered with interest.

Regulus hesitated, searching for the right words. "I am," he replied quietly.

“Good.” The Dark Lord’s lips curved faintly, an expression both approving and faintly amused. “Victor tells me you have been diligent. It is no small thing to infiltrate a school as prestigious as Beauxbatons.”

Regulus glanced at Thorne, who offered an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement. Gathering himself, Regulus continued. “It takes time. Earning trust isn’t easy.”

“No, it is not,” the Dark Lord said, his tone softening, almost indulgent. “But you understand this, which is why you are succeeding.”

Regulus swallowed, his nerves abating slightly under the praise. He straightened a little, emboldened.

“Tell me,” the Dark Lord continued, leaning forward slightly, his fingers steepled. “What have you observed?”

Regulus hesitated again. “There’s… a group of students,” he began slowly. “They come from powerful families — d’Albret, Sauveterre, Roux, Von Meyer. I’m earning their trust. I think they could be persuaded to support us, but it’s early.”

He paused, his voice faltering slightly. “I’m sorry I don’t have more.”

The Dark Lord raised a hand, silencing the apology with a gentle gesture. “Do not apologise, Regulus. You are precisely where you should be.” His voice took on a note of reassurance. “These things cannot be rushed. To earn trust is to sow seeds that will one day bear great fruit.”

The words settled over Regulus like a calming draught and he nodded, a flicker of pride stirring beneath his nerves. “Thank you.”

The Dark Lord’s gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, studying him with a depth that made Regulus’s breath hitch. Then, he shifted, turning to the others in the room.

“There is another matter,” he said, his tone light but commanding. “One that requires delicacy.”

The air in the room seemed to thicken. The Dark Lord’s gaze returned to Regulus, but there was no menace in it — only expectation.

“There is a student at Beauxbatons,” the Dark Lord began, his voice

smooth as silk. “A young woman whose father is… of great interest to us. He is a potioneer and an independent researcher, as well as the head of a network vital to our efforts. His work could be revolutionary, but he remains elusive. We need to bring him to our side.”

Regulus’s throat tightened slightly. “And you believe… she knows where he is?” he asked carefully.

“Yes, I think she does,” the Dark Lord replied, his tone thoughtful. “But you misunderstand me if you think we seek him for anything but partnership. His knowledge, his skills — these are treasures to be cultivated, not destroyed.”

The tension in Regulus’s chest eased. He nodded slowly, the knot of worry unravelling.

“Her name is Mathilde Legot,” the Dark Lord said, the syllables falling deliberately, as though imprinting the name on Regulus’s memory. “You will observe her. And through her, we will reach him. Your instincts, your patience — these are your strengths, and they will guide you.”

“Yes,” Regulus nodded softly.

The Dark Lord smiled, and though it was faint, it felt like sunlight breaking through a storm. “You are doing well, Regulus. Exceptionally well. You should be proud.”

A swell of emotion rose in Regulus’s chest – adoration, perhaps, or awe. The Dark Lord’s vision was grand, his power undeniable, and to serve the one at the helm of the Revolution filled Regulus with a gratitude beyond measurement. He thought of his friends — Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, Severus — how they would have seethed with envy knowing he was here, speaking with *Him* , Regulus’s name spoken by *him* , chosen. Chosen above all others to serve, to have this opportunity, at his age…

It was with a mixture of intoxicating euphoria and a new surge of solemn devotion that Regulus returned to Beauxbatons.

You’re doing well, Regulus. Exceptionally well.

*****

Potter hadn’t asked about Regulus’s project when he returned to the

dorm Friday evening, and Saturday had been swallowed up by Quidditch practice and homework with their respective Beauxbatons friends. It wasn't until late Saturday evening, as they wound down for the night, that Potter brought it up.

"So," Potter said casually, stepping out of the bathroom. His hair was still damp from the shower, curling wildly as droplets slid down his temples. He wore only a pair of loose pyjama pants, the waistband slung low on his hips, exposing the defined lines of his abdomen. "How was your project yesterday?"

Regulus opened his mouth to answer but promptly forgot what he was going to say. The sight of Potter — skin flushed from the warm water, droplets of moisture glistening on his chest, his eyes twinkling with that signature mischief… It rendered his mind blank.

"Err—" Regulus stammered, trying to string together a coherent sentence.

Potter smirked, running a hand through his wet hair, sending a cascade of droplets scattering to the floor. "Lost for words?" he teased, his voice low and amused.

Regulus narrowed his eyes, trying to summon a retort, but Potter had already crossed the room, closing the space between them. "What is it?" Potter added, his smirk widening. "Is it the wet hair?"

"I'm not—" Regulus began, but before he could finish, Potter dipped his head, his voice dropping to a playful whisper.

"I'd understand, you know," Potter smirked. "Just the idea of you, bare chested, hair wet… It'd drive me mad, too."

Then, suddenly yet slowly, Potter reached for Regulus, his hands sliding to cup the back of his neck, and pulled him into a kiss.

It was searing and immediate, a clash of heat and want that left Regulus reeling. His thoughts, his mission, the tension from meeting with the Dark Lord — all of it dissolved as Potter's lips moved against his. Regulus tilted his head, opening his mouth to deepen the kiss, and was rewarded with a soft groan from Potter that sent a jolt of electricity down his spine.

Potter's hands were everywhere — firm on his neck, skimming down to his waist, tugging him closer until their bodies were flush. Regulus could feel the damp heat of Potter's skin, the way his heart pounded

against his own chest. He threaded his fingers through his wet hair, tugging lightly, earning another low, breathless sound that made his knees weak.

They stumbled toward Potter's bed, and Regulus barely registered the soft thud as he landed on the mattress. Potter leaned over him, bracing himself on his forearms, his weight grounding but not oppressive. His mouth found Regulus's again, hungrier this time, lips trailing down his jaw, teeth grazing the sensitive skin of his neck. Regulus gasped, his hands gripping the waistband of Potter's pyjama pants to anchor himself.

"Potter—" Regulus murmured, his voice ragged and breathless, but Potter silenced him with another kiss, all-consuming and relentless.

Regulus matched his intensity, his body responding instinctively, eagerly. He pulled Potter closer, their hands tangled, their kisses deepening until Potter's weight settled fully against him. Potter shifted slightly, his hand trailing lower, slow and deliberate, until it brushed against Regulus's thigh. The touch sent a lightning bolt of heat coursing through him, and he arched slightly, his breath hitching.

He was so hard it was nearly unbearable, his entire body alight with tension. He wanted this — wanted him, the heat, the closeness, the overwhelming sensation of being wanted in return. His body screamed for it, begged to move, to grind, to feel Potter's hardness against him.

And yet—

The moment Potter's hips shifted, and as he felt him, his hardness pressing against his thigh, something sharp and cold slashed through the haze of heat and pleasure. It came unbidden, unrelenting, dragging him under like a riptide.

Regulus's body went rigid. His limbs froze, his breath caught in his throat, and his mind reeled as the memory forced its way to the surface.

A rough hand on his thigh, breath hot and heavy against his hair. The weight of a body, too large, too much, bearing down on him. His own hands — small, too small in every sense of the world – too small for the act they had to perform…

He couldn't breathe.

Potter immediately noticed Regulus's panic and partial dissociation

from reality – he pulled back instantly, his expression shifting from heated to concerned and contemplative in a second.

“Hey,” he breathed softly, his voice laced with confusion and worry.

But Regulus couldn’t answer – his chest was tight, his vision blurring at the edges as his mind spiralled, trapped in the memory he couldn’t escape. His hands, which had moments ago clung so desperately to Potter, now lay limp at his sides, trembling faintly.

“Hey,” Potter whispered, his tone gentle, his movements cautious as he shifted away slightly to give Regulus space. Somehow, he was able to pinpoint Regulus’s emotions quite accurately. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” he breathed, “– *so* sorry – you’re safe – it’s okay – just breathe, alright?”

Regulus blinked rapidly, forcing himself to focus on Potter’s face — on the concern etched into his features, the genuine care in his eyes.

He managed to nod, though the motion was small, shaky.

“Just… come back to me, okay?” Potter whispered, his voice low and steady, but threaded with emotion. “Tell me when you’ve come back to me…”

Regulus swallowed, trying to steady the chaos inside. His breath came in short bursts, still too quick, but slowing just enough for him to feel in the present again – the cold memory still there, but no longer drowning him.

Slowly, Potter lay down next to him on the bed. He kept his distance, his body turned away and Regulus could feel the space between them – though it was not an absence but a kind, respectful shield.

Potter’s eyes were wide, his lips parted as if he was holding back words — thoughts — that were too heavy to speak aloud.

“Someone’s done things to you,” he concluded eventually, nodding faintly. “Against your will.”

Regulus didn’t answer, which in itself was enough of an answer – together with the pain in his eyes, raw and unspoken.

“That man from the Boggart…” Potter continued, his voice soft but certain, some pieces clearly falling into place.

Regulus swallowed, his throat dry.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Potter breathed, his face contorting in guilt. “I… I should’ve asked. Should’ve asked if you wanted to, should’ve waited for your consent—”

Regulus shook his head, the gesture small but firm, a clear rejection of Potter’s self-blame. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t Potter’s fault – no.

He wanted it. They both wanted it – it was Regulus who was the problem.

Regulus hand reached out to him in an attempt to make sure that he knew – knew that it wasn’t *his* fault.

“I’m sorry,” Regulus whispered, his voice croaked.

“No,” Potter said firmly. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.” His concerned gaze slowly travelled over Regulus, who was clearly over the height of his panic but still very pale. “You want – want to lie with me a bit?”

Regulus nodded, slowly closing the distance between their bodies, lying side by side, his head against Potter’s shoulder.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Potter’s hand rested gently on Regulus’s, his fingers tracing soft circles over his palm — an intimate, grounding touch, offering comfort while respecting Regulus’s need for distance. He moved his head slightly backwards to lock eyes with Regulus.

“I — I can’t,” Regulus managed, his voice hoarse as he tried to look away. But Potter held his gaze, a quiet determination in his eyes, trying to keep the connection Regulus wasn’t sure he wanted to treasure or outrun.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Potter said softly, a faint, almost wry smile touching his lips. “I’m asking if you *want* to.”

Regulus sighed, feeling Potter’s warm, steady gaze settle deep in his chest. “I might. But — now now.”

Potter nodded. “Alright. Just know that you can always talk about it with me — it doesn’t matter when or where or why. But only when you're ready.”

Regulus swallowed hard, touched by the sincerity in Potter’s words.

He felt the earnesty in his words – and the relief that came with it. He could talk about it, but he wouldn't press him to; for Regulus, it felt like a fresh breath of air, new room to breathe.

Regulus looked down, focusing on the way Potter's fingers moved over his own, steady and gentle. Almost without thinking, he interlaced their fingers.

"And…" Potter's voice softened, barely a whisper now. Regulus looked up and was struck by the look in Potter's eyes – vulnerable, raw.

Regulus shifted closer, resting his head on Potter's shoulder, feeling the warmth of his breath against his hair.

"What is it?" Regulus asked.

"Do you – would you want to, you know, take this a step further… physically?"

Regulus was touched by the insecurity laced in Potter's voice. As if it hasn't been perfectly clear — his entire body betraying how much he wished to.

"I don't know if I can."

The words came out before he could stop himself – brutally honest. He was afraid of Potter's reaction — disappointment would be the worst. Irritated he could live with, he could rationalise against. But disappointment would be harder to tackle, especially because it'd be more than logical.

So, Potter's reaction came as a surprise.

"Again, now what I'm asking," he said, his tone serious, but balanced with a warm, soft laugh, vibrating against Regulus's head. "I'm asking if you *want* to. That's the starting point."

They lay quietly until Potter spoke again, the tone soft and intimate.

"You know what they say — when there's a will, there's a way. We could… you know, discover, explore whether there's a way." His voice was barely a whisper, warm against Regulus's hair. He felt his other hand softly stroking his curls, a warm, loving gesture that sent unparalleled warmth through Regulus's body. Potter continued. "But we start with the will — if there's no will, we mustn't bother trying to find the way. It all starts with the will."

Regulus nodded, the situation somehow again pushing him to bluntly blurt out the truth. “I’d want to.”

He felt Potter smiling against his head. “Alright. We could … make rules, or … communicate. Talk things through before we… go there.”

Regulus nodded, although he was aware that he probably wouldn't be a very good communicator in this department.

“It’s very important, you know,” Potter continued, his eyes staring in the distance. “In general – it is very important to guarantee and respect, you know, each other’s boundaries.”

Regulus leaned into him, instead of responding, settling his head in the warm space between Potter’s chest and shoulder.

“And,” Potter continued, now softly stroking Regulus’s cheek, then slowly moving down to rest at his waist, “most importantly — it’s a … continuous process, you know. It’s always alright to change your mind.”

Regulus nodded, his eyes drifting closed. There was one thing – one thing that he wished Potter knew, that he wished he understood. But how hard it was to pass the words over his lips, so heavy, almost impossible to form in the warmth and safety of lying here.

Potter must have sensed his hesitation, because he gently caught Regulus’s gaze. “What is it?” he asked softly.

Regulus swallowed. He was so close to the topic, the hardest miles were already travelled… He’d never find an opportunity like this – where the foundation had already been laid down for him…

He took a deep breath.

“Just—” he started, his throat tight, “don’t… don’t call me wonderful.”

He saw a flash of a very raw and tender emotion flash through Potter’s eyes before he composed himself. “Of course.”

And it was just too much — the understanding in Potter’s eyes, the safety of his warm embrace, the intimacy of laying his soul bare for him and how gently and loving and considering he treated it — and Regulus couldn’t stop it from happening, although he *hated* it, was utterly embarrassed by it — but he welled up, he felt the sting of of

tears, and then he cried.

Not dramatically — silent but unmistakable crying, his face buried into Potter's chest out of fear, not wanting to be confronted with the shame of meeting his gaze.

And as he felt Potter pressing a trail of warm, gentle kisses over his head, it was as if a new world opened up to him. Never had he felt so connected to someone on such a deep level — had he felt so understood without explaining, had he felt so strong in his vulnerability and so protected while utterly exposed. Never had he felt so unconditionally treasured, felt so safe. And it was with this feeling, warm in his body, hopeful in his soul, that he fell asleep with Potter's fingers tracing through his curls.

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He was the first to wake up the next morning. In their sleep, they had turned on their sides, Potter behind Regulus, breathing in his neck and his arms draped around him in a sleepy embrace. He slightly pulled his head backwards, granting him full sight of Potter – hair even more disastrous than usual, but as always, endearing. Although waking up next to him wasn't exactly a rarity anymore, it still surprised him how much more vulnerable, how much softer Potter looked without glasses. No banter, no smirking, no witty comments; completely real and sincere. He was still fast asleep – his chest rising and falling as he breathed slowly and steadily.

Regulus's fingers moved without thought, gently carding through the disaster that was Potter's hair. The motion was slow, unhurried, almost hypnotic. Still sleeping, Potter turned, now facing Regulus. Regulus's hand froze for a moment before he continued, drawing a contented sigh out of Potter as he took a deep breath. His nose brushed against the fabric of Regulus's shirt, and he made a small, instinctive sound – somewhere between a hum and a murmur – which felt so intimate that it sent a lump to Regulus's throat.

In a sudden surge of affection, Regulus slowly trailed his finger over Potter's slightly parted lips, taking in their texture – a little dry from the night, but perfect all the same, soft and full, and – of course, they belonged to Potter, after all – already curved into a faint smile even in sleep.

It was just a feather-light touch, but it was enough to stir Potter. His lips curled further, though his eyes stayed shut. He pressed an

instinctive kiss against Regulus's finger before his eyes fluttered open, hazy with sleep.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice hoarse, deepened by sleep.

Regulus couldn't help but stare at him.

"Ah yes, my morning coupe," Potter said dryly, self-deprecatingly. Regulus snorted. " *Your* hair wakes up flawless, of course," he continued with a mock disgruntled tone. Regulus huffed a laugh, but before he could reply, Potter reached out, his fingers gently brushing over the dark curls. His touch was light, reverent, and his gaze softened as he murmured, " *Shit* – completely flawless."

Before he could formulate a coherent thought, Regulus felt the distance between them close, Potter's lips against his tongue brushing over Regulus's. The kiss was warm and slow, unhurried yet filled with purpose, a languid melding of mouths that stirred heat low in Regulus's belly. Regulus's hand tangled in Potter's hair, then moved down to his neck and beneath his shirt, fingertips grazing the bare skin of his back.

He couldn't get enough of this — the closeness, the gentle sound Potter made when he caressed his skin… It was intoxicating. Regulus felt himself sinking into the sensation, his breath hitching when Potter's lips parted slightly against his own, his tongue brushing tentatively, teasingly. The ache in Regulus's chest deepened, pooling low, spreading through him in waves. When Potter's hand slid along his side, his thumb skimming the edge of his ribcage, he shivered, gasping against his lips.

His body burned with a desperate, burning need to be touched and grazed and kissed and — aching, *aching* to be touched there, the blood drained from his head to that one place he wanted to be touched, to be held so desperately.

Potter, however, steered very obviously clear of the place where Regulus most wanted him, sticking to his hair and his upper chest solemnly.

"Touch me," Regulus whispered against Potter's lips, his voice shaky and raw.

Potter drew back slightly, "What?"

"Will you —" Regulus's breath hitched as he forced himself to meet

Potter's gaze. "Will you touch me?"

The vulnerability of the request hung in the air, and for a moment, Potter simply stared at him, his own breath shallow, his lips parted as he searched Regulus's face. Then, he leaned back in, lips finding Regulus's with a smile.

"You — you sure?" he breathed against his lips, his breath as ragged as Regulus's — which did little to ease the growing ache.

"Yes," Regulus whispered — he desperately wanted him to touch him, to experience it, he didn't want the moment, the desire to pass, for fear or memories to sweep in. He felt so hot and so ready – he didn't want the feeling to pass, wanted it to happen before it was too late.

Potter kissed him softly, deeply, as his hand began its slow descent. It was torturous, every movement measured and deliberate, clearly giving Regulus the space to pull back if he wanted to. But Regulus didn't – didn't want to stop it – wanted to experience it, all of it, so desperately. His body leaned into the touch, arching slightly as Potter's palm slid over the plane of his stomach, warm and steady, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

When Potter's fingers finally dipped beneath the waistband of his pyjama pants, Regulus let out a sharp, shaky breath, his body trembling with anticipation.

And then—

Oh.

The first touch was almost too much. Regulus gasped, his head falling back against the pillow, his fingers clutching at Potter's arm. The sensation was overwhelming, a surge of pleasure so intense it made his mind go blank. Potter's hand was warm, firm, and his movements achingly gentle as he wrapped around him, pausing to meet Regulus's gaze once more.

"Still good?" Potter whispered, his voice low, rough with desire and concern.

Regulus nodded quickly, unable to form words, his breath coming in shallow gasps. His body was taut with need, every nerve alight as Potter began to move. And oh, it was *divine* .

It was slow at first — maddeningly slow — but impossibly intimate.

Potter's hand was steady, his strokes careful, almost reverent, and he didn't look away for a single moment. His eyes, deep and dark, were locked on Regulus's, their gazes intertwining like a tether, grounding him, holding him together even as his body fell apart beneath Potter's touch.

It wasn't just the pleasure — though that feeling was undeniable, overwhelming, his entire body trembling with it — it was the way Potter looked at him, like he was something precious, something to be cherished. There was no rush, no urgency, just an unspoken promise in every touch, every movement, that this was for him, that he was safe, wanted.

Regulus's breath hitched as Potter's thumb brushed over a sensitive spot, and when Potter repeated the motion, a soft, helpless moan escaped him. His body arched instinctively, chasing the sensation, his fingers tangling in Potter's hair, desperate for something to anchor himself to.

"*Fuck*," Potter breathed at the sight, his gaze never faltering. Regulus was completely taken away by the look in his eyes – his eyes suffused with lust, but not the dark, predatory kind – the soft, awestruck kind – like he marvelled at everything unfolding in front of him, *by* him now.

His hand moved with a deliberate rhythm, drawing Regulus closer, higher, until he was trembling on the edge, every muscle taut, every nerve alight.

And then, finally, he broke.

The release was shattering, a wave of pleasure so intense it left him gasping, his body shuddering as he clung to Potter, his face buried in his shoulder. Potter's hand slowed, his movements gentle as he guided him through it, his other hand coming up to cradle the back of Regulus's head, grounding him softly.

When it was over, Regulus lay there, his chest heaving, his mind blissfully blank. Potter pressed a kiss to his temple, his fingers brushing soothingly through his curls.

Their gazes met again, and Potter smiled softly. "Still with me?"

"Yes," Regulus murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. He couldn't say more, didn't want to add more – afraid that he'd break the perfection, the beauty, the peace of the moment.

Regulus had no idea how long they lay there – their lips occasionally finding each other again in soft, unhurried kisses, perfectly befitting the air thick with warmth and connection. Eventually, though, they decided to get up and get ready for the day, although in complete silence – comfortable and reflective, filled with resonance – as if they were both still savouring what had just happened.

Still, Regulus would very quickly come to realise that even the most peaceful, beautiful moments would eventually meet their brutal end.

Neither of them seemed particularly eager to head to lunch, where the chatter and noise of the crowded hall would feel like an intrusion on the satisfied calm still humming between them. So, Potter, resourceful as ever, slipped down to the Dining Room while Regulus waited, returning minutes later with a bundle of pastries and fruit wrapped in napkins. He threw Regulus his signature mischievous smile, eyes twinkling with boyish triumph as he held up his haul.

“Let’s go picnic,” Potter declared, his voice light, slowly returning to his usual cheerful and bantering tone.

Regulus rolled his eyes with a smile tugging at his lips and nodded, following him outside. They found a sunny patch of grass near the edge of the grounds, private but not isolated. The weather this time of year at Beauxbatons was considerably warmer than at Hogwarts, and they sat close together, cross-legged, enjoying the gentle beams of sunlight on their skin, the small bundle of food nestled between them.

For a while, they ate in companionable silence, the quiet punctuated only by the occasional chirp of birds and the rustle of leaves. Regulus felt oddly light, like a weight he hadn’t realised he was carrying had been lifted.

Potter broke the silence first, leaning back on his elbows and squinting up at the sky. “So,” he said casually, his voice warm and conversational, “what’s the plan for the rest of the day?”

Regulus glanced at him, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. “You mean after you so heroically rescued a combined breakfast and lunch?”

Potter grinned, the mischievous glint returning to his eyes. “Well, yes – my heroics can’t be the highlight of your day.”

Regulus snorted, brushing crumbs off his lap. “I told some people I’d meet them in the afternoon.”

Potter stretched lazily, shifting his weight. “Oh,” he said, sitting up slightly. “The group from your Guild, I reckon?”

Something in Potter’s tone caught Regulus’s attention — a faint undercurrent, difficult to place. He frowned.

“Yes,” Regulus replied slowly, narrowing his eyes. “What’s with the tone?”

“I don’t have a tone,” Potter said quickly.

Regulus raised an unimpressed brow, his voice sharp with mockery. “It’s *dripping* with tone, Potter.”

Potter hesitated, his crooked smile betraying him. He ruffled his already messy hair, an unconscious gesture that made his discomfort all the more obvious.

“It’s nothing,” he finally said, though the casualness sounded forced. After a pause, he added, “Just… you’re kind of an enigma, you know that?”

Regulus’s frown deepened. “I’ve been called many things, Potter, but I don’t think ‘enigma’ has ever made the list.”

Potter laughed, the sound warm and easy. “Yeah, well. I mean, you seem like the type who’d want to avoid attention, right? You’re all quiet and broody—”

“I am *not* broody,” Regulus interrupted, his tone as dry as parchment.

“—but somehow, everywhere you go, you’re surrounded by the popular crowd. The Guild leaders, the House stars, the golden group of whatever school you’re in.” Potter shrugged, his gaze lingering on Regulus. “It’s… interesting, is all.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Not the moment for these analyses, Potter.” Then, with a sharp quirk of his brow, he added, “Besides, you’re one to talk. Don’t act like you haven’t noticed the entirety of Hogwarts swooning over you and your merry band of lunatics.”

Potter grinned, leaning back with a satisfied flair. “What can I say? Irresistible charm, unmatched wit, devastating good looks… It’s hard to be this perfect.”

Regulus couldn’t suppress the snort that escaped him. “How about

you?"

Potter tore off a piece of pastry, popping it into his mouth nonchalantly.

"Oh, I happen to have plans too. I'm going to trick my Guild friends into exploring more of the palace and the grounds. There *have* to be more secret passageways, hidden rooms, mysterious tapestries – the whole lot."

Like Regulus generally stuck to hanging around with the friends he had made on his first day, Potter also stuck to his initial friends; the two blokes and the *way* too enthusiastic girl that they had met during their first breakfast at Beauxbatons.

Regulus couldn't suppress laughing at the sight of Potter some way or another forcing the three students – way too enthusiastic, like Potter, and clearly too eager to go wherever the Hogwarts student was going – following him around the palace and its grounds.

With a laugh, Regulus continued. "You really think they're as… thrilled about these kinds of things as you?"

Potter shrugged, grinning. "Doesn't hurt to try. Besides, they're my best shot at finding something cool. Théo's resourceful – he's already mapped out half the library. Bastien's like a walking almanack for obscure magical history. And Mathilde, well, she's great – always up for an adventure. Between her and the others, I'm sure we'll find something. Oh, and she's got this *insane* spellwork project going on. She was telling me about it yesterday—"

Regulus stiffened at the name, the sound of it slicing through the tranquil air like a dagger. His head snapped up before he could stop himself.

"…What?"

Potter blinked, caught off guard. "Well – this project, she just started it–"

"No," Regulus cut him off, shaking his head. His voice dropped, tight and strained. "I mean… *who*?"

Potter frowned. "Well, Mathilde, of course. Mathilde Legot."

There is a student at Beauxbatons… A young woman whose father is… of

great interest to us. You will observe her. And through her, we will reach him. Your instincts, your patience – these are your strengths, and they will guide you. Her name is Mathilde Legot.

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face, his pulse hammering in his ears.

Fuck.

Chapter 8: Of Highness & Suspicion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weeks that followed, Regulus was positive he was high — the high people claimed to get from the Muggle plants the Hufflepuffs secretly grew on the Hogwarts grounds.

For the first time in his life, he fell asleep peacefully and woke up genuinely happy — and slept without nightmares tormenting him in between. Every evening, he drifted off beside Potter – arms draped around him, Potter's face tucked in the warm hollow of Regulus's neck, or, when the disaster of Potter's unruly hair became to intrusive, Regulus would sprawl toward the edge of the mattress but always managing to keep a leg or arm entwined with Potter's, no matter how far he stretched away.

It felt as if finally, after endless trial and error, life was starting to work out for him. It was as if he'd finally lost an invisible weight that had been pushing him down for years, as if he had finally been liberated from a force slowly eating at his soul and now, for the first time, he could feel how deeply it had poisoned him. And now, now he was free. Liberated. Weightless.

The knowledge that he could apparently connect to another human being like that and that he apparently wasn't completely broken — it boosted his spirits, and somehow also his confidence — beyond the imaginable.

He was so high that he even managed to block out the knowledge that the fact that he managed to build this intimate bond with a bloke only underscored how broken he actually was. And, he was so high that he also managed to push aside the reality that the main target of his mission had now become one of the closest friends at Beauxbatons of the only person that had made his way through Regulus's soul and had left it undamaged — had in fact, begun to repair it.

Merlin, was *he* on a high.

He hadn't completely forgotten of his task, though. He had made it a mission to become closer with Maxim, Bastien, Isolde and Élise, for they had been around Beauxbatons long enough and had a lot of

information about the students it hosted. And, with his newly found confidence and peace, Regulus had managed to open up to the group — although carefully — and had thereby managed to forge a friendship that'd otherwise probably have cost him years to build.

It helped that they actually made for rather enjoyable company. It turned out Bastien had an exquisite sense of humour and Maxim was impressively knowledgeable. Then Solène brought a genuine curiosity about nearly everything, and Élise added a carefree, witty charm that tied the group together. True, Regulus would have traded them all in a heartbeat for the chance to spend more time with Potter, but he understood the importance of his mission and knew this group held the key to uncovering the answers he sought.

He knew that Potter was probably better at providing an answer, but something held Regulus back from involving him; it blurred the lines between two opposing parts in his life too much. It was fundamental to keep these equally important parts of his life separated — Potter, the blood traitor and archenemy of the Blacks but also the only person that had unlocked Regulus's heart, and the mission, the thing that put him in the middle of the ground-breaking societal and political change that would soon unfold.

It was a Wednesday afternoon and Regulus had just delivered his latest edition of the Pure Quill at Thorne's office when he decided to join the group in 'their room' — which wasn't their room at all but just the music room which they claimed as their own whenever there were no classes scheduled and they wanted a private place to gather.

It was nice, though – in some way it reminded Regulus of the Charms classroom at Hogwarts – though this room had the added warmth of instruments scattered about, along with more inviting pouffes and cushions. They spent their time there playing chess on the floor, working on homework at the desks, or lounging aimlessly while one of them experimented with an instrument in an unhurried, improvised manner.

Regulus entered the classroom and took in the sight of Maxim engrossed in a book, Lucien plucking out painfully off-key notes on a harp, Élise sketching on a piece of parchment, and Solène hunched over her homework.

"Ah, Black," Maxim said with a smirk as Regulus stepped into the room. "How gracious of you to join us."

The others greeted him warmly — Lucien with a mock salute, Élise flashing a wide smile, and Solène smiling, gesturing for him to settle down next to her. He slipped into the seat and unfolded the Daily Prophet, scanning its pages and letting their chatter drift around him.

“You’re absorbed in politics again, aren’t you?” Lucien teased, a note of exasperation in his voice.

Maxim interjected before Regulus could reply.

“You’d do well to keep up, Lucien. He knows what’s happening in Britain — a revolution is brewing. Staying informed isn’t just wise; it’s necessary.”

It had been easy to pinpoint the group’s political stances and that of their families. Maxim’s father was a Swiss banker and his mother a high French socialite; not particularly politically active but the kind that would be once their own interests were at stake. Solène’s father was an important French politician – a traditional one; and Bastien’s parents were both Healers, but also from a long lineage of pureblood traditionalists. The only parents that were a bit off in this group were Élise’s – her mother a French progressive and her father an Irish artist. She herself claimed to be ‘apolitical’ – whatever that might mean. Regulus, however, quickly realised that Élise was the kind to go where the wind blew her; so as long as her friends blew the wind into the traditional direction, she would steer that way too.

“You think it’ll spill over soon?” Solène asked, eyeing Maxim and Regulus curiously. “I mean – it hasn’t really come off the ground in Britain yet, has it?”

Regulus considered her words – not quite sure how much to give away in order to get something in return.

“I think it’s a matter of months before it solidifies in Britain,” he said finally, his voice even. “Rumor has it they’ve been gathering under the leadership of one man—”

“The Dark Lord,” Solène interjected smoothly.

Regulus arched an eyebrow, mildly surprised by her knowledge. He nodded, conceding the point. “Yes. The Dark Lord.”

The name lingered in the air, heavy as lead. Unbidden, Regulus’s mind flashed to the meeting less than a week prior.

You're doing well, Regulus. Exceptionally well.

Élise's snort broke his reverie. She lounged on the floor, her red hair catching the firelight as she flipped idly through a leather-bound book.

"Really. There's so much more to life than politics and all that tiresome nonsense."

Maxim rolled his eyes and chucked a cushion at her, grinning. "You really do live in a dream world, Élise. What is it you read, anyway? Fairy tales? Poetry? Something equally useless?"

"I'm not just reading," she shot back, her voice lilting with mock indignation. "But yes, I prefer to enjoy life. Why waste time on revolutions or dull political games when I could savor the finer things —art, music, wine, balls…" She waved a hand dramatically, as if sketching an invisible masterpiece.

The group dissolved into laughter, even Regulus unable to suppress a small smile.

"At least you're passionate about something," Lucien teased, his smirk playful.

"Oh, Lucien, you know I'm passionate about a *lot* of things," Élise purred, her voice dripping with innuendo.

Regulus stiffened, but quickly composed himself, feigning sudden interest in the Daily Prophet, but glancing at the group from the corner of his eyes, as Maxim barked a laugh at the exchange.

He'd been able to pinpoints the group's political views instantly, as well as much about their families from the stories they had shared, but somehow he hadn't been quite able to place the group's romantic involvement with each other – he was quite sure that there was some history between Lucien and Élise, but there was nothing indicating any romantic involvement between Solène and Maxim. Still, it would be logical; they were a tight knit group and all of age…

While Regulus was lost in thought, Bastien abandoned his harp.

"Finally," Solène muttered.

The collective sigh of relief was short-lived, however, as he took to the piano and began hammering out a tuneless melody. Regulus winced;

how nobody had hexed Bastien yet was completely beyond him.

Then Solène leaned forward, changing the subject. She arched her brows. “Would you join them — the revolutionaries, or whatever they’re calling themselves? I mean – it’s happening in *your* country…”

Regulus shrugged, feigning indifference, though his heart quickened. Finally, they were touching on the topic he’d been waiting for. He folded the newspaper slowly, as if considering her question. “Maybe,” he said nonchalantly. “They make valid points. Would you?”

“My father would,” Solène said, nodding. “He’s been saying for years that if the British revolution ever spills into France, he’d join them without hesitation.”

“My family would as well,” Maxim added, his voice taking on a sharper edge. “The current government here is too progressive, too eager to challenge traditions. It’s nothing new — France has always been that way — but it’s grating, all the same.”

Lucien, oblivious to the tension building in the room, hit a particularly discordant note on the piano. The group groaned collectively.

“What about other families?” Regulus asked, his voice steady despite the rising tension within him. “Are there many progressive ones at Beauxbatons?”

Solène tilted her head, considering.

“It’s a mixed bag, honestly. Some are progressive, others fiercely traditional. But there are definitely notable families tied to the government.”

Regulus felt the answer before it came.

“The Legot family, for one,” Élise chimed in, rolling her eyes with theatrical exasperation. “They’re practically the poster family for progressivism. Mathilde Legot’s father may not be a politician, but she has four uncles in high-ranking government positions. One of them is even the Minister’s right hand.”

Regulus’s chest tightened. He fought to keep his expression neutral, but inside, he had a hard time fighting off the feeling of his sinking heart – getting information about Legot’s father would probably prove very hard; surrounded by political figures and deeply entrenched in the progressive movement, they were likely well-protected.

Another jarring melody from Lucien's piano yanked him from his thoughts. Solène groaned, rising from her chair. She marched over to the piano and shoved Lucien aside with a smirk. "Move over. Let someone with actual rhythm try."

Turning toward Regulus, she beckoned. "Play me something. Help me figure out that piece I was struggling with the other day."

Regulus hesitated but eventually stood, crossing the room to the bench. He played a few measured notes, the melody soft and deliberate, before pausing to show Solène the proper fingering. Watching her mimic his movements, he couldn't help but be reminded of Isa. Solène wasn't quite as sharp or witty, but there was something in her determination and poise that echoed his absent best friend. Not the same, of course — no one could be — but close enough to be oddly comforting.

The melody wound to a close, and the room settled into a rare moment of quiet. Élise broke it first. "Should we work on our project for Philosophical Potions?"

"Let's do it tomorrow," Maxim suggested dismissively.

"I won't be here tomorrow," Regulus pointed out. "You know — practice at Hogwarts."

"Ah, yes," Maxim said, his smirk sharp. "Though I'm not sure why you bother. All that training, only for Beauxbatons to smash Hogwarts anyway."

Lucien and Maxim were both on Beauxbatons' team; Maxim the Captain and the Keeper, Lucien one of the Chasers.

"Don't count your dragons before they hatch, Maxim," Solène teased, a sly grin tugging at her lips. "I'm sure they have a solid team. Regulus is bound to be good. And well — they have Potter for Captain…"

Regulus swallowed, feeling very uncomfortable at discussing Potter in the current setting.

"Is he really as good as everyone says?" Élise asked, rolling her eyes, though her voice betrayed a curious edge.

All eyes turned to Regulus.

He stiffened, fingers fumbling over the piano keys as he played a few more notes in an attempt to deflect attention.

“Well, yes,” he admitted quietly. “Probably better, even.”

Lucien leaned back, intrigued. “Potter... where’s he from, anyway? What’s his family like? Are they traditionalists?”

Regulus hesitated. “Not at all,” he said finally. “His father’s a staunch supporter of Muggle and Squib rights.”

Maxim sneered. “Must be inspiring, being led by a traitor. Such an honour.”

“It’s a good thing it’s only for a year, then,” Solène said comfortingly. “He will survive.”

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Contrary to Maxim’s words, however, Regulus very much enjoyed being on Potter’s team. Yes, it was still awkward sharing a locker room with his brother and Potter, especially when taking into account where Potter’s lips and hands had been moments before they got to Hogwarts. Still, spending time with Potter, even if it was in the company of the rest of the team, was pleasant, and seeing him fly was an additional advantage. Besides that, his spot on the team came with the privilege of being able to visit his friends multiple times a week – Potter always pretended practice took way longer than it actually did, thereby granting himself and Regulus the possibility to linger at Hogwarts after training.

The team was starting to find its rhythm. Sirius was working better with the other Beater, who had finally figured out how to match Sirius’s reckless energy with more precise hits. The Keeper had been inconsistent in the last two practices, but nothing too alarming. As for the rest – they were solid.

This was a good thing because Regulus wanted to win the Cup. No, he *needed* to. The first match, Beauxbatons versus Durmstrang, was in October, and Hogwarts wouldn’t play until after Christmas, when they’d face Durmstrang. There was time – but not enough to grow complacent.

On Saturday morning, after breakfast, Regulus and Potter were in the process of getting ready for practice in their dorm.

Regulus stepped out of the bathroom, toweling his damp hair with casual ease. He was already partially dressed in his Quidditch kit, the deep colours of his uniform clinging to his lean frame. Leaning lazily against the doorway, he paused to take in the sight before him.

Potter was pacing the length of the dorm like a man possessed, a piece of parchment clutched in one hand and his wand twirling absentmindedly in the other. He was muttering under his breath, occasionally jotting something down with quick, precise strokes.

“You look like a lunatic,” Regulus said, his voice dry and sharp.

Potter stopped, mid-stride, fixing him with a look. “We need to be sharp today, Black. Plays to run, timing to perfect. I’ve got at least five new strategies I want us to try.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves nonchalantly. “Only five? I’d have thought with all that pacing, you’d have revolutionised Quidditch by now.”

Potter’s eyes, still fierce with focus, flicked over Regulus – lingering a second too long. Regulus caught the look, the flash of desire evident in Potter’s gaze as it roamed over the curve of his shoulders, the sharp cut of his jaw, the way the snug fabric of his uniform clung in all the right places.

Potter’s lips twitched into a crooked smile. “Careful, Black,” he said, voice warm and teasing. “Keep that up, and I’ll have you running laps.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, unfazed while smoothing the hem of his jersey. “Threats now? My, my, the power of leadership has gone to your head.” His voice dipped with dry amusement. “What a tyrant you’ve become.”

Potter took two deliberate steps closer, closing the distance between them. He stood in front of Regulus now, closer than necessary, his expression sharp but tinged with mischief. “And you’re deflecting,” he said simply, brown eyes locked onto Regulus with unrelenting intensity.

Regulus tilted his head, feigning confusion. “Deflecting? From what? Your endless pre-practice speeches? Or your remarkable talent for muttering under your breath and walking up and down the dorm?”

Potter shook his head, interlocking his brown, twinkling eyes with

Regulus. “Deflecting from how badly you want to snog me right now.”

Regulus blinked at him, utterly unimpressed, and then snorted. “That has to be the worst line I’ve ever heard.”

Potter grinned, unashamed. “Doesn’t make it less true.”

“Go back to your strategies, Potter,” Regulus said, his voice smooth but dismissive as he turned away to grab his broom from the floor. “You’re hardly the multitasking type.”

For once, Potter didn’t argue. Instead, he leaned in, swift and deliberate, and kissed him. It was quick but firm, enough to steal Regulus’s breath for half a heartbeat before Potter pulled back, looking obnoxiously self-satisfied.

“See?” Potter said, his grin maddening. “Multitasking.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed despite the flush creeping up his neck. “We’d better get going, Potter – practice starts in half an hour.”

“Mm,” Potter hummed in agreement, though he didn’t move. Instead, he subtly guided Regulus backward until his back hit the wall. “Better make the most of the time we’ve got, then,” Potter murmured, his grin softening into something more wicked.

Regulus opened his mouth in an attempt to deliver a retort, but the words caught in his throat when Potter leaned in. His lips brushed the edge of Regulus’s jaw, trailing down to his neck. The deliberate slowness of the motion sent a sharp thrill coursing through him, a heat pooling low in his stomach.

“We’re going to be late,” Regulus muttered, though his voice betrayed him – low, rough, and edged with desire.

“Well,” Potter murmured against his skin, his hands sliding down to Regulus’s thighs, tracing slow, teasing circles over the fabric of his trousers, “that depends on how quick we finish here.” He kissed the corner of Regulus’s mouth, his grin maddeningly cocky. “Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to have you finished in no time.”

Regulus let out a quiet laugh, though it was shaky and full of heat. “You think you can get away with this and still lead a functional team?” His words were sharp, but his voice faltered slightly as Potter’s hands moved higher, deliberate and firm.

Potter didn't answer. Not with words, at least. Instead, he kissed Regulus again, slower this time, deeper – his tongue grazing Regulus's. Regulus playfully bit Potter's lip before caressing it with his tongue, drawing a dangerous sound from Potter's mouth. The sound made Regulus reel with desire, all his defences faltering as Potter's fingers deftly worked the buttons of his trousers, all protests dissolved into a low, shuddering breath.

"Let's just say," Potter murmured against his lips, his voice a mix of teasing and intent, "I thrive under pressure."

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After this new shot of his drug, Regulus walked with Potter to Beaumont's office, sure that he was high as a kite. Potter looked at him from the corner of his eyes — a playful smirk starting to tug at his lips. Potter clearly tried his best to look cocky, but Regulus had long come to realise that the cockiness was mostly just a façade. In his most bare moments, the intimate time between dusk and dawn, when he had Regulus trembling in his arms, he showed his true, genuine side; playful yes, but, above all, kind — a kindness that Regulus hadn't encountered before, so sincere and raw that it often left a lump in his throat.

Regulus hadn't returned the favour to him yet — had only touched Potter's skin on his back and stomach. Deep down he didn't want anything more than give Potter what he'd given him — yearned for it, longed for it, because he was sure that there could be nothing more beautiful, more captivating than the sight of Potter falling apart like that at his hands — *by* his hands, giving himself to him in full surrender, stripped bare of all pretences, until nothing was left but his true, genuine self. Just the thought of it set Regulus's body aflame, and still, he hadn't yet been able to.

It had been a big step for Regulus to let Potter touch him, but the step towards laying his own hands on Potter was even bigger. It was the closest to what he had been forced to do so many times, the closest to that box of torture that he had stored far away to the periphery of his very being. How paradoxical it was, to realise that his biggest desire was so close to his biggest nightmare.

And still, he was optimistic — if he'd been able to cross the first boundary, the second would be possible too. He just had to work up the courage to cross it. Potter, of course, didn't push anything and somehow genuinely made Regulus feel that he wouldn't mind waiting,

perhaps for years even. It was so characteristically Potter — so earnest, so sincere and good-natured that it surprised Regulus Potter hadn't been placed in Hufflepuff.

Regulus looked at Potter's mischievous smirk and rolled his eyes.

"What, Potter?" Regulus asked, his tone mildly annoyed, though the reluctant smile tugging at his lips seemed impossible to suppress.

"Nothing," Potter said with a laugh. "You just seem happy."

"Yes, and that feeling is rapidly fading," Regulus retorted, though it only earned him another bark of laughter.

"Now, don't be sour, Black," Potter grinned, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "I like being the one putting that smile on your face."

"Then go easy on the laps, *Captain*," Regulus shot back smoothly.

Potter laughed again, louder this time, but as they entered Beaumont's office, he let the remark slide, his grin lingering as they stepped inside.

"Good evening, Headmaster," Regulus and Potter said in unison.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter and Mr. Black," Beaumont replied, gesturing for them to step toward the fireplace. It had become a familiar routine — Potter always went first, tossing Regulus a cheeky smirk before disappearing into the flames.

But this time, Potter didn't immediately move toward the fireplace. Instead, he turned to Beaumont, his expression unusually cautious.

"Sir?" Potter began, his tone almost sheepish. "I — very unfortunately — forgot to notify you earlier, but today we had a special team day planned."

Regulus blinked, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. *Team day?*

Beaumont looked equally surprised. "Team day, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Potter said, nodding earnestly. "We'll be training for most of the day, with bonding exercises in between, and we'll finish with a shared dinner. So... we'll likely be returning a bit late tonight. If that's alright with you, of course. I realise it's rather short notice."

Regulus turned to Potter, his expression incredulous – he opened his

mouth to object, but Potter turned sharply, giving him a stern look implying he had to keep his mouth shut.

Regulus froze, then quickly closed his mouth, nodding excessively toward Beaumont in agreement, his face an exaggerated mask of sincerity. “Yes, indeed, Headmaster.”

Beaumont studied them both for a moment, his expression unreadable, before breaking into a broad smile. “No, I don’t see why that would be a problem, Mr. Potter. Shall we agree on your return by eight o’clock?”

“Splendid, sir,” Potter said, grinning again, his charm back in full force. “Eight is perfect.”

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“ *Bonding exercises* , Potter?” Regulus hissed as they made their way out of Dumbledore’s office to the Hogwarts grounds. Their rendezvous in the dormitory had – as Regulus had predicted – left them late, meaning Potter had set an infuriating quick pace that Regulus was now struggling to match. “If you think I’m having dinner with my brother you have officially lost your mind.”

Potter turned to face him, somehow managing to walk backward without missing a step — a feat that was annoyingly impressive. He smirked, that infuriatingly confident grin that Regulus wanted to both slap and kiss off his face. “Relax, Black. We’re having normal practice today. I just... have some personal matters to handle afterward. And thanks to Beaumont, I now have the freedom to do whatever I please until eight tonight.”

Regulus groaned as understanding dawned. “You lied to Beaumont?”

Potter’s grin grew even wider, if possible. “I prefer to think of it as strategic storytelling.”

They entered the locker room to find the rest of the team already waiting, fully kitted up and very clearly aware of how late their Captain and Seeker were.

“Prongs,” Sirius greeted Potter with a raised brow, though his tone was more amused than accusatory. He gave Regulus a curt nod, which Regulus copied. Really – compared to weeks ago, the situation between them was actually improving; or at least, Sirius seemed to have more or less come to peace with the fact that he’d be playing on

the same team as his brother the entire year. “Why’re you late?”

Regulus very promptly looked the other way as he fought to suppress the vivid flash of memory of him against the wall in their dorm, Potter’s hands around him, foreheads touching and gazes locked as Potter coaxed him toward the brink.

Regulus winced.

“Sorry, we got held up at the Headmaster’s office,” Potter said smoothly, although Regulus noticed from the corner of his eyes that Potter seemed to look every way except for his.

“What’s the plan today, Captain?” asked Cora Macmillan, the eldest of the Macmillan sisters, her tone light and teasing as she tossed a Quaffle towards Potter – which he, naturally, caught without as much as a blink of his eye.

Potter grinned, seizing the opportunity to redirect the attention. “Three-on-three scrimmages to sharpen our coordination, then some shooting drills for us Chasers and defense work for the Beaters. Keepers and Seeker drills at the end. We’ll wrap with a strategy debrief.”

A collective murmur of approval rippled through the team as they stood and began heading for the pitch.

Sirius and Potter walked together at the front of the group, already deep in animated conversation about game tactics. Regulus lingered at the back, feeling the soft crunch of grass underfoot as they crossed to the pitch.

The training itself was excellent, perhaps the best of the season so far. The team moved like a single, well-oiled machine, their timing and coordination sharp. Sirius’s Beating was as brutal as ever, while Potter, Cora and her sister Diana outmaneuvered nearly every Chaser trio they faced. Regulus himself felt unusually focused, diving and weaving through Bludgers and opposing players with a precision that earned him an approving nod and a set of twinkling eyes from Potter.

It was undeniable – the team had become a force to be reckoned with; Regulus knew that more preparation would only add to it, but somehow he considered it a shame that they weren’t playing the first game in just two weeks, but instead had to wait until after Christmas to show everyone how good a team they had become.

As they wrapped up practice, Potter stood in the center of the team, addressing them with his usual cheerful energy. “Fantastic work today! Truly – if we continue playing this way, we’ll be indestructible after Christmas! We’ll continue with the same exercises on Tuesday.”

The team began heading for the locker room, their chatter filling the air as they went, Regulus, as usual, trailing behind and observing everyone.

As they were entering the locker room, Sirius suddenly froze, leaving the rest of the team to bump into each other. “Shit,” Sirius hissed, his eyes widening.

“What’s the matter?” Potter asked, leaning against the lockers now that they had all entered the room.

Sirius groaned, hastily collecting his stuff from the locker room. “I was supposed to meet Mary for breakfast – I forgot – *shit*.”

Potter smirked. “So, what’s the plan? Flowers? Groveling?”

“Ah, my charm will suffice,” Sirius grinned, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “See you in the common room in a bit?”

Potter gave him an amused nod.

In the end, this left Potter and Regulus to walk toward the castle together, falling into step.

“So,” Potter began casually, glancing at Regulus, “where’s the smile, Black? I was merciful today — didn’t even give you a torturous number of laps.”

Regulus huffed, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward despite himself. “Merciful? Anything more and you’d have had a riot on your hands.”

“Oh, admit it,” Potter teased, leaning slightly closer. “I went easy on you.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but didn’t pull away. “Sure you did, Captain Lunatic.”

Potter grinned, his shoulder brushing Regulus’s as their steps matched in rhythm.

“Alright,” Potter said, laughing at his own words, “if you think *this*

was bad, I'll show you next week – might add an extra lap for every pout. Or, who knows, maybe I'll make you work on your stamina in a more creative way."

As much as Regulus tried to keep himself composed, he couldn't help but let out a bark of laughter at this – there was something highly infectious about Potter's cheerful laughter and banter.

It was in that moment that Regulus caught the faintest shift in the air — a subtle movement just ahead. His heart sank as he glanced up to see Remus Lupin standing not far off, his expression unreadable but his golden eyes flicking sharply between them.

Regulus froze, his mind racing. Had he seen? Had it been obvious?

They were supposed to be nothing more than acquaintances – or distant team mates who were only part of each other's lives because they absolutely had to. Sure – Potter was friendly with everyone, would probably even exchange pleasantries with someone about to mug him… But Regulus wasn't. And he was painfully aware how friendly and comfortable the exchange between them had looked like.

Potter, to his credit, recovered almost instantly. His face lit up in a grin as he strode toward Lupin.

"Moony!" he exclaimed, clapping the other bloke on the shoulder with practiced ease. "How's it going?"

Lupin's gaze shifted to Potter, his expression softening, though there was still a glimmer of suspicion in his eyes. "Didn't expect to find you out here."

"Just wrapping up practice," Potter said cheerfully, steering Lupin toward the castle.

Regulus hung back, his mind still churning. As Lupin and Potter walked away, Lupin cast one last glance over his shoulder, his look sharp and probing.

*****

Regulus's friends were very pleased with him being allowed to spend the entire day at Hogwarts — and he couldn't help but agree when he strolled back into the common room after a shower. It felt weird to wear Hogwarts robes, seeing he was to return to Beauxbatons later, and it felt weird to wear his blue satin Beauxbatons robes for an entire

day at Hogwarts, so he — very uncharacteristically — opted for jeans and a Muggle sweater.

He found the usual group in their corner of the common room — Barty and Avery trying spells on each other, Severus immersed in the Daily Prophet and Mulciber and Evan launching on a sofa lazily, talking about Merlin knows what.

“Black!” Evan greeted him with a grin, taking in the casual outfit. “What’s this? Beauxbatons’ new uniform?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, though a small smirk betrayed his amusement. “I’m here until eight,” he replied, leaning against the arm of a chair. “Didn’t feel like wearing satin robes all day.”

“You’re here *all day*?” Barty exclaimed, his face lighting up. “Finally!”

“Brilliant,” Avery added, smirking. “You can join our club this afternoon.”

“Club?” Regulus arched an eyebrow.

Evan leaned forward, lowering his voice theatrically. “You know. *Our club.* ” His eyes darted around the room as if revealing some grand conspiracy.

“Where do you lot even meet for that?”

“Some old classroom in the dungeons,” Barty said with a mischievous grin. “Looks like it hasn’t been used in a century.”

It felt good to be among his friends – he liked the dynamic of their group; a pleasant mix of banter, pranks and discussion. It was perfect for Regulus, who liked to chip in something every now and then, to subsequently withdraw to the Prophet and then go back to watching a funny exchange between two of his friends.

It didn’t go past him, though, that apparently their group had become the popular gang – sure, Lestrange and Dolohov had left some vacancies now they’d graduated, but somehow Regulus hadn’t really expected it to *truly* work that way so quickly. Their appeal was evident with most of the fellow Slytherins’ eyes on them, with more than just a few girls stealing glances at them, making especially Barty and Mulciber look way too smug.

Regulus couldn’t care less – if anything, he found the fuss annoying.

His occasional appearances at Hogwarts from Beauxbatons only seemed to heighten the intrigue surrounding him, which he found mildly irritating. He turned back to the economics section of the *Prophet* , trying to focus on a piece about wand-lore import regulations, but was distracted by Evan suddenly lunging at Barty in what could only be described as some alarming Muggle-style wrestling move.

“You’re doing it *wrong* !” Avery exclaimed through laughter, as Evan attempted to pin Barty down with a poorly executed maneuver.

“Idiots,” Regulus shot, though the faintest smirk betrayed his amusement.

The commotion quickly drew the room’s attention. Students openly stared now, some gawking in admiration, others whispering about the group’s wild antics.

Barty finally wrestled free, red-faced and panting. “Alright, alright!” he said, throwing his hands up. “No more. Let’s duel instead.”

Mulciber cracked his knuckles, grinning. “You’re on.”

Regulus watched as the two squared off, the room quickly forming a loose circle around them. The duel was chaotic and comical, with Barty dodging a well-aimed jinx only to trip over a discarded quill. By the time Mulciber managed to send sparks flying harmlessly over Barty’s head, Regulus was doubled over with laughter, tears pricking his eyes.

Mulciber caught his breath and turned to Regulus, pointing his wand. “Your turn, Black.”

“Oh, come on,” Regulus protested, though he could see the others weren’t about to let him sit this one out.

“Afraid of a little duel?” Barty taunted, his face lighting up with glee.

Rolling his eyes, Regulus stood, brushing off his sweater. “Fine. But don’t expect me to go easy.”

He stepped into the impromptu arena, facing Barty. The room was electric with anticipation, students whispering and craning their necks to see. The duel began with a flick of wands, and soon the space was alive with flashes of light and bursts of laughter. Barty sent a harmless tickling hex, which Regulus dodged with exaggerated flair, retaliating

with a minor tripping jinx that had Barty flailing to regain balance. Back and forth they went, curses and jests flying in equal measure, their laughter infectious. Regulus had to admit that Barty had become better at duelling – his reflexes were fast and his aim precise.

Their club was clearly paying off already.

Finally, after a particularly well-aimed jinx from Barty that sent Regulus spinning briefly on his heel, the match ended in roaring applause and scattered laughter. Regulus fell back into the sofa, out of breath but grinning, as the crowd dispersed.

Evan and Avery sauntered off, trailing behind a pair of girls who lingered, whispering and casting coy smiles over their shoulders. Regulus paid them little mind until his gaze landed on the familiar set of piercing blue eyes belonging to Eira Warrington.

She stood just beyond the circle of onlookers, her dark hair framing her delicate face. For a moment, their eyes locked. Her smile was shy, tentative. Regulus raised his eyebrows slightly, a touch of amused curiosity playing on his face. She smiled wider before turning away, her cheeks faintly pink.

A low whistle broke the moment.

“What was that about?” Barty teased, nudging him as he slouched back into the sofa, looking between Regulus and Warrington as the latter walked away.

Regulus shrugged. “Nothing,” he answered earnestly.

“She’s totally into you, mate,” Evan chipped in.

“Yes, go get her with your Black Charm,” Barty said.

Regulus snorted, keeping his mind as much as possible from the only person in the world he’d possibly want to ‘get’.

*****

Some time later, the group relocated to the abandoned classroom deep in the dungeons. The space was cluttered with stacks of books and discarded parchment. Avery and Evan tested jinxes on each other, their laughter echoing off the stone walls. Severus kept mostly to himself – hunching over a desk, working on some spells. Barty and Mulciber gave Regulus insight into the spells and material they had

already covered, which was rather impressive; apparently Barty and Evan turned into swots if for the right cause.

When they finally headed to dinner in the Great Hall, Severus suddenly pulled Regulus aside. “Can we have a word?”

Regulus was completely taken aback by this – it was a very unexpected and rather blunt move.

“What is it?” Regulus asked curiously.

“I want in,” Severus blurted out, his dark eyes intent. “With the revolution.”

Regulus tensed. *Ah.*

He hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the others heading into the Hall.

“Err – Severus –”

“I know I’m not a pureblood,” Severus cut him off, his voice quiet but firm. “But I have enough to offer. But I need someone to guide me in – you know people, you can make it happen.”

Regulus hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the others heading into the Hall. “It’s not that simple.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

Regulus wasn’t quite sure whether he wanted to laugh at the situation or not – sure, Regulus was ‘in’ – but he wasn’t exactly in the position to drag people with him to meetings. The thought of unexpectedly showing up with Severus in a meeting with Voldemort was both utterly hilarious and seriously frightening.

Still, it was very hard to turn Severus’s pleading eyes down, and well, Regulus did feel for him – he was knowledgeable, interested, driven; but he had no powerful familial background, nor the charisma to make up for that.

Regulus decided to settle. “Alright – I – I’ll see what I can do.”

Severus nodded curtly, his expression unreadable. Together, they entered the Great Hall, joining the others at the Slytherin table.

His meal at Hogwarts was uncomfortable for two reasons that, in a

weird turn of events, had nothing to do with the general spike in attention in him – the Black heir, the Seeker on the House Quidditch team, who would show up randomly and was now wearing *Muggle clothes*. Normally that would have been the crux of his discomfort, seeing how much he generally disliked being the center of attention.

No, the first reason behind his discomfort was Isa. He hadn't seen much of her in recent weeks – whenever he was at Hogwarts, she was often seated with Amaryllis and Melania, while he spent his rare moments in the common room or at meals with his usual group. Tonight, she was at the far end of the Slytherin table, her head bent slightly as she listened to Amaryllis chatter beside her.

Regulus caught her gaze unexpectedly. Her eyes met his across the room, contemplative and searching. He offered a soft nod and a faint smile. Isa returned the smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. She looked … off. Something about her was different tonight — she looked less vibrant, less full of her signature radiance.

He frowned, his gaze lingering for a second longer before he turned back to his plate, unsettled.

Another notion making Regulus very awkward was the group of sixth years at the Gryffindor table. Sirius was laughing loudly, his dark hair falling into his eyes as he leaned toward Potter, who was holding court as usual. Several girls were seated around them, giggling or fawning annoyingly and the like, while the werewolf, Lupin, sat beside Potter, quiet but amused.

Regulus tried to ignore them, but it was impossible when, as if on cue, as if feeling his gaze, Potter looked up and locked eyes with him.

And, really, Potter was *such* a child, having the self-restraint of a toddler left alone in Honeydukes.

Because, naturally, the intensity of Potter's gaze caught Regulus off guard, making it impossible to look away, especially as Potter's smirk widened and he tossed him a secretive wink. Regulus rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress the faintest twitch of a smirk in return.

It was then that he noticed Lupin.

Of course the werewolf was watching the exchange – he'd be dying to know what was going on after witnessing the exchange on the Hogwarts grounds. Potter making jokes, leaning in close and Regulus responding with a bark of laughter – he could definitely make

something of that; although it was innocent and could also still be brushed off as some Captain-Seeker dynamic.

That possibility was gone now. Regulus was positive that Lupin was onto them; that he knew there was something between his best friend Potter and the brother of his other best friends, Sirius. So, Regulus decided to tear his eyes away from the Gryffindor table for the rest of the evening, the nagging feeling simmering under the surface.

*****

Back at Beauxbatons, the dormitory was quiet as Regulus and Potter went through their nightly routines. Regulus had no idea what 'personal affairs' Potter had had to attend that got them at Hogwarts until the evening – he was quite sure that he wouldn't share, though, so he decided not to ask. It was probably one of his pointless, weird endeavours like trying to map out the Beauxbatons grounds.

As Regulus pulled his pyjama shirt over his head, smoothing the fabric, he shifted his head towards the bathroom, where Potter, toothbrush in hand, leaned over the sink, foam gathering at the corners of his mouth.

"Your friend, the werew– Lupin," Regulus began, pausing as he fiddled with the buttons on his sleeves. "He suspects something."

Potter froze mid-brush, his expression briefly startled before he spat into the sink. "Moony? Impossible."

Regulus folded his arms, leaning back slightly. "No — he suspects, perhaps even *knows* there's something between us."

Potter resumed brushing, speaking through the bristles. "Oh, he didn't see anything, Black — just some banter between the Captain and the Seeker."

Regulus arched a sharp eyebrow. "No, Potter. You might be smirking at or laughing with every other person you come across, but I don't. And he knows that."

Potter rinsed his mouth and straightened, a playful grin already tugging at his lips. "Ah, are you saying I'm special, Black?"

Regulus tried to hold it in, but a burst of laughter escaped him, loud and unrestrained. "You're such a nutter," he muttered, shaking his head. His smile faded slightly as he turned back, his tone more serious

now. “I’m not joking, though – no one, *truly* no one can know about us.”

Potter grinned, stepping closer with that infuriating twinkle in his eye. “Us, huh? I like the sound of *‘us’*. ”

Regulus rolled his eyes, though he could feel the heat rising to his cheeks. “I’m serious, Potter.”

Potter wiped his mouth with a towel, tossing it onto the sink. “Yes, I know. But just — if he did know — it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

Regulus stiffened, his arms folding across his chest. “No. No one can know.”

Potter crossed the room, sitting on the edge of his own bed as he held Regulus’s gaze. “I get it. But listen, if it were Moony — he’d be fine with it.”

As if this was about the stupid werewolf and him knowing; it was so much bigger than this – the werewolf was only a trivial, minor part in the grand scheme of things. No, the danger went way beyond that; Mother, all his family members, his friends, the Dark Lord…

He decided to let it slide, though, knowing that the subject was too big for the current setting. He tilted his head as his lips twitching into a wry smile.

“Ah, fine – fine like Sirius would be?”

Potter’s face shifted, the playfulness draining away as his gaze turned grave and serious. “Padfoot – Sirius has a problem with you for all the wrong reasons.”

Regulus looked at him, unmoving, his expression guarded.

Potter leaned forward, his voice quieter now, almost imploring. “He thinks you left him bleeding to death during Christmas. And he thinks you … follow *their* ideology – you know, their stances of being superior to Muggles, being in favour of Muggle attacks… But well, I know better.”

Regulus’s eyes narrowed slightly, his posture stiffening. He decided not to dignify this with a reply – afraid what his response would do, what it would possibly set in motion.

So, luckily, Potter continued. “I know you risked your life to get him out of there. And I know you’re … you’re good. I saw you with that Muggle at the bookstore, even…”

Regulus’s expression flickered. Was this it? Potter thought Regulus was ‘good’ – whatever that might mean? Sure, he wasn’t in favour of pointlessly going after Muggles; it served no goal, was only a distraction from the things that really mattered. Although wizards and witches *were* superior in some way; after all, they could have all that the Muggles had, but the Muggles could never have magic.

The more reason to keep these worlds separated; the magical word for the witches and wizards, the Muggle world for the Muggles. If everyone had abided by that, there’d be no Squibs, no pure bloodlines dying out…

Regulus shrugged it off. “It’s more complicated than you think.”

Potter tilted his head, studying him. “Isn’t it always?”

Regulus gave a faint, humorless laugh, but he didn’t respond.

The silence between them stretched, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Potter rose, crossing the small space between them, his hand brushing against Regulus’s arm. Slowly, he leaned in, their faces close enough for Regulus to see the faint freckles on Potter’s nose.

Regulus hesitated for a fraction of a second before giving in, meeting him halfway. The kiss was slow and warm, dissolving all thoughts about and memories of politics, of reality, all of its importance paling in comparison to this feeling, this reality.

Chapter End Notes

> Ah, I feel this chapter is a bit boring; don't despair, things will get more interesting very soon ;)

Chapter 9: Of Quests & Games

Chapter Notes

TW: explicit sexual content ;)

Time passed swiftly, and Regulus was more and more realising that he needed to act on his mission. The approachable and the open a book the girl had looked when he first met her, the closed and distant Mathilde Legot turned out to be. Regulus and Potter had an unwritten understanding not to mingle in each other's group of friends – much reflecting the reality of Hogwarts – meaning that Potter would generally steer clear of Lucien, Maxime, Solène and Élise, while Regulus faced uneasy glances when he got too close to Théo, Bastien and Mathilde. In normal circumstances, Regulus would be pleased by this weird understanding between him and Potter, but now it mostly meant that any sudden interest from Regulus in Potter's friends would seem highly suspicious.

Beside this, Regulus was deeply reluctant to use Potter as a means to extract information.

It wasn't really an ethical thing; sure, he knew that Potter wouldn't appreciate it at all; but then again, Potter wouldn't like a lot of things that Regulus was involved in. No, it was more that involving Potter in this – even if unknowingly – for Regulus would blurr the very clear lines that he had drawn between his head and his heart; the former belonging to the revolution and the cause, the latter belonging to Potter and Potter alone. It was a dangerous, a painful balancing act, and even indirectly involving Potter in this was to risk unraveling the fragile balance between these two conflicting worlds.

No, if he wanted to get somewhere, he had to rely on the traditional tools of research and logic.

So, on his Friday afternoon off, which he normally spend with Potter in some way or another for they were the only ones – with Khan – who didn't have class, he pretended to have to finish some of his homework in the library while Potter had chosen to continue his ludicrous project of exploring every inch of Beauxbatons and its sprawling grounds.

He knew that Potter, on any other day, would've opted for joining him in the library, but now didn't because he was nervous. It wasn't

obvious, but Regulus had grown to know Potter too well to miss the signs: the restless energy, the faster pace of his speech, the way his thoughts seemed to drift mid-conversation. He was clearly very anxious about the match the next day.

Which was amusing, really — considering they weren't even playing in it.

That Saturday, the first match in the Quidditch tournament took place; Beauxbatons versus Durmstrang. Maxim and Lucien had spent most of the week out on the pitch, leaving Regulus with Élise and Solène in the music room. The match was to take place on Hogwarts grounds – like all the other matches – probably part of a concession to compensate for the Hogwarts students being granted the rare privilege of spending a semester at Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; it was no secret the two schools were very secretive and probably wouldn't find the prospects of hundreds of students, family members and, of course, journalists very appealing.

Now, even though Hogwarts wasn't playing until after Christmas, Regulus could tell that Potter was nervous. This would be the first opportunity to size up the other teams, to scrutinise their tactics, their formations, their strengths — and their weaknesses. Regulus, for his part, couldn't bring himself to care much – sure, he wanted Hogwarts to win and felt a hum of anticipation at the prospect of seeing the other teams fly, but he also knew there were much more pressing matters.

He seized the rare occasion of having the entire library to himself that Friday afternoon and intended to make the most of it. He combed through dusty tomes, flipping through records of old French families, until he finally stumbled upon a genealogical chart for the Legots. The discovery sent a jolt of excitement through him, but once going through it, he realised it didn't offer much beyond what his French friends had already told him, or what could otherwise be useful in pinpointing the location of Mathilde Legot's father. The book underscored that the Legots were a prominent family, and the chart revealed that Mr. Legot had, indeed, four brothers – the progressive French politicians his friends had talked about.

Now, although the books yielded fascinating details — a scandal surrounding one uncle, a fiery speech by another — frustratingly, there was no mention of a potioneer named Legot. No hints – no breadcrumbs. Nothing. It was maddening.

The hours slipped by, and Regulus's frustration grew as he delved deeper into the archives, his notes expanding but not in the direction he'd hoped. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice call his name. He quickly closed the book he'd been poring over and slid it into the nearest shelf, feigning nonchalance as he pointedly grabbed his Potions book from the table nearby.

"Getting on with homework?" Potter asked, his tone as casual as ever, though his eyes flicked curiously toward the table.

"Yeah," Regulus nodded. "I think I'm more or less finished."

"Dinner, then?" Potter suggested.

Regulus nodded and followed him out of the library into the Dining Hall, where – naturally – their ways parted, although not before Potter had shot him a cheesy smirk.

He settled down at the usual table with his friends, realising his quest in the library had worked up quite an appetite. As he piled his plate with a variety of foods, his eyes wandered across the hall. Mathilde was laughing at something Potter had said, her face breaking into a wide, goofy grin. Regulus watched for a moment as the rest of the table joined in, their laughter ringing out, before he turned back to his own friends.

*****

The next day, Regulus woke with a start as the bed shifted beside him. He blinked groggily, disoriented by the faint rustle of sheets and the sound of footsteps padding softly across the floor. It was still dark outside, the room faintly lit by the slowly growing light of dawn outside. His sleep-muddled brain caught up with the situation as the door to the bathroom clicked shut. Potter.

With a low groan, Regulus rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling, trying to will himself back to sleep. He closed his eyes, but moments later, the bathroom door creaked open again. He cracked an eye just in time to see Potter shuffling back toward the bed — only to veer off and start pacing the dormitory instead.

Regulus groaned. "What're you doing Potter?" His voice was hoarse with sleep. He propped himself up on one elbow, glaring at the blurry outline of Potter moving back and forth. "It's the middle of the night. Get back in bed, you lunatic."

Potter paused mid-stride, running a hand through his hair in that nervy way he always did when something was bothering him. “Can’t sleep,” he mumbled. “Too nervous.”

Regulus groaned louder this time, slumping back onto his pillow. “Oh, bloody hell –come here and lie down before I hex you.” He half-heartedly flopped a hand toward Potter in what might have been a beckoning gesture — or a lazy, subconscious attempt to smack him.

Potter hesitated for a beat, but eventually he padded back to the bed and slipped under the covers. Regulus felt the mattress shift as Potter settled, his head finding its usual spot on Regulus’s chest. Sleepily, Regulus let his hand drift to Potter’s arm, brushing lazy circles there.

For a moment, he thought peace had been restored, but then Potter started fidgeting; he shifted onto his side, then onto his back, then onto his stomach. He tugged at the blankets. Let out a dramatic sigh. Shifted again.

Regulus’s patience snapped. “No, no, Potter — we’re not doing this,” he hissed, sitting up abruptly. He shot an exasperated glare at Potter, who was now sprawled half-off the pillow. “Are you trying to sleep, or are you testing how much a mattress can withstand?”

“Sorry,” Potter said, though his grin suggested he wasn’t sorry at all.

Regulus stared at him for a moment before throwing off the blankets in defeat. “That’s it. I’m not doing this. If you’re going to act like a deranged puffskein, I’m going to breakfast.”

Potter sat up, frowning. “It’s barely dawn.”

“Yes, thank you for pointing that out,” Regulus said dryly, already stalking toward the bathroom to dress. “I am *painfully* aware.”

Once clothed, he grabbed his wand and an additional sweater, shrugging it on as he headed for the door.

Potter followed him out moments later, still pulling on his shoes. They made their way down the quiet corridors together, their footsteps echoing in the stillness. As they neared the Dining Hall, Potter broke the silence.

“Do you really think we shouldn’t watch the match as a team? Talk tactics and all?” His voice was hesitant, but curious.

Regulus gave him a sideways glance, his mind already conjuring the awkwardness of such a scenario. The idea of sitting with both Sirius and Potter under the scrutiny of journalists, Ministry officials, or, Merlin forbid, someone like Lucius made his stomach twist. No – he really didn't want to be spotted next to his brother and Potter if not absolutely necessary.

"We'll talk through it at practice on Tuesday," Regulus answered. "Besides, you've got the Omnioculars, don't you? We can rewind and study the plays later."

Potter nodded slowly, though he still looked slightly unsure.

When they reached the Dining Hall, it was nearly empty, save for a few scattered early risers. They paused in the doorway, each glancing instinctively toward their usual spots. Then Potter broke the unspoken rule between them and slid into the seat beside Regulus with a mischievous grin.

"No one's here," he said breezily, already reaching for a plate.

Regulus sighed but didn't protest. Technically, this violated their arrangement to sit with their respective groups, but they'd likely be done before anyone else arrived. "Fine," he muttered, pulling a plate toward himself.

"Brilliant," Potter said, his voice bright as he began enthusiastically piling food onto his plate.

Regulus rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress the faint curl of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

*****

Regulus, Potter and Khan were to return to Hogwarts through the fireplace in Beaumont's office, probably, as Khan had pointed out, to keep the French students' mode of transport a secret.

Not that Regulus minded — it was much more convenient this way. They were allowed to stay at Hogwarts until after dinner; naturally no one knew how long the match was going to take, but there'd be food — adjusted to the time — in the Great Hall for all the students, including those of the other schools, to round up the first match.

As Regulus exited Dumbledore's office, there was still more than an hour left for the foreign students to arrive, so he decided to drop by

the dungeons.

“Have fun watching,” Potter said with a smirk as they parted ways in the Entrance Hall. Then, leaning in subtly, he added in a low voice, “And see you tonight.”

Regulus rolled his eyes — with a reluctant, small smile — and quickly went to his familiar dorm, where most of the boys were still asleep, except for someone in the bathroom. The door was ajar, and steam curled lazily out into the dormitory. Curious, Regulus pushed the door open—

And shrieked. *Very* femininely.

Standing before him was a nearly naked girl, her back turned to him as she bent down to retrieve a towel. The sight of bare skin — so much bare skin — seared itself into Regulus’s brain before he quickly whipped around, his face burning. It was enough to recognise her, though, as one of Eira Warrington’s friends.

“Oh *shit*,” he cursed. “I’m sorry — I thought you were Evan or Barty…”

“No, no, it’s fine!” the girl said quickly, fumbling with the towel while Regulus retreated to his bed, studiously staring at the floor to give her space.

To be fair, it was rather idiotic of her to be changing in the boys’ bathroom with the door open and at least four blokes just beyond the wall. Still, though it wasn’t entirely his fault, Regulus felt mortified and apologised profusely — about fifty times, in fact — managing to wake the rest of the dorm in the process.

The girl, now properly dressed, hurried out of the room, her face as red as Regulus’s.

“Ah,” Barty drawled, pulling his bed curtains open with a smirk. “I see you’ve met Celine.”

Evan, muffling a laugh, added, “You can *scream*, Black.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow, his composure somewhat restored. “Is she — your girlfriend?”

Evan snorted.

“No,” Barty replied, lounging back lazily. “Just met her last week. But she’s fun.”

Crabbe, groggy but amused, muttered, “Yes, we’ve heard, Crouch.”

“Ah, sorry, mate,” Barty said, his tone indicating he was, in fact, far from sorry. “Do I hear jealousy in your voice?”

*****

Eventually, after having grabbed some toast from the Great Hall, Regulus walked to the Quidditch pitch accompanied by the usual group of blokes. He had chosen to wear his Hogwarts robes in support and in an attempt not to stand out in his group of friends. Just as they exited the Entrance Hall and stepped into the October wind nipping at their faces, Regulus heard a familiar voice shout his name.

“Reg!”

Regulus turned and was met with the sight of Cissy, her pale blonde hair gleaming in the morning light, her elegant robes fluttering slightly in the breeze.

“Cissy!” he said, surprised, striding toward her while his friends lingered behind. “What are you doing here?”

She gave him a knowing smile. “Oh, you didn’t think I’d miss this, did you? It’s such a unique event — students from all over the continent, not to mention the political implications. I managed to get permission through the Ministry,” she added, almost offhandedly. “Lucius pulled a few strings.”

As they spoke, Barty and Mulciber sidled up, their expressions shifting into something that Regulus immediately recognised — and *truly* dreaded. Their postures straightened as they joined them, offering Cissy what they probably thought were charming smiles.

“Mrs. Malfoy,” Barty began smoothly, inclining his head. “I didn’t expect to see you gracing the stands today. Quite the honor.”

“Indeed,” Mulciber added, his tone dripping with what he likely thought was sophistication. “Your presence truly elevates the occasion.”

Cissy’s smile froze, after which she looked at Regulus, startled, with eyes eyebrows – and then burst into laughter.

“Sure, boys,” she laughed dismissively, patting Barty on his shoulder. “How kind of you.” Then she turned to Regulus, who couldn’t stifle his own laugh. “I’d better not keep you. I imagine you’ll want good seats for the match – enjoy the game, boys.”

“Thanks, Cissy, you too,” Regulus said, watching as she strode away, her effortless elegance leaving Mulciber and Barty visibly deflated.

Regulus turned to them, his expression a mix of surrogate shame and amusement. “What was *that*?”

“What?” Barty said defensively, though he glanced away.

“You do realise she’s married, don’t you?” Regulus said sharply, his voice dripping with disbelief. “Not to mention the idiotic notion that you’d stand a chance.”

“We know who she’s married to, Black,” Barty shot back, rolling his eyes. “That’s the point. Malfoy’s probably the most important revolutionary, right? We’re just making sure we’re noticed. Networking.”

Regulus snorted derisively. “Right – and hitting on his wife is definitely the best way to worm your way into his good graces.”

Evan and Avery had joined them by now, the former struggling to contain his laughter. “You’ve got to admit,” Evan said, grinning, “they’ve got guts.”

The group continued toward the pitch, the energy in the air becoming palpable as they neared. The Quidditch stands had been expanded dramatically, rising high above the pitch and ringing it completely. There were no clear sections for students of each school, though Regulus noted that most of the Hogwarts students had clustered loosely by House, their colors easy to spot.

As they walked up the steps, Regulus let his gaze trail over the crowd. He spotted Potter and Sirius seated together, a few rows up and to the left. Potter caught his eye, offering the barest hint of a smile — a small, almost private tug at the corner of his mouth. Regulus quickly looked away as his gaze landed on the werewolf sitting beside them, the familiar pang of unease knotting his stomach.

Further along, his attention was caught by a section filled with people clearly not from Hogwarts. Among them, Yaxley and Lucius sat together – Lucius looking polite and formal as ever and Yaxley looking

around as if he owned the pitch. Lucius caught Regulus's eye and smiled, whereas Yaxley tossed him a very cheeky smirk.

Eventually, they settled a couple of rows beneath Isa, Melania and Amaryllis. Isa's gaze met Regulus's, and she offered a warm, almost shy smile. Regulus inclined his head in return before turning away, being met by the very annoying sight of a group of sixth-year girls – the group Eira and Celine belonged to. They were casting frequent glances toward his group, their giggles audible even over the rising din of the crowd. Naturally, all of his friends, barring Severus, visibly enjoyed the attention. Regulus rolled his eyes in annoyance as he nudged Barty in his side, prompting him to act normal.

"Stop. It's embarrassing."

"What?" Barty replied, voice indignant as he turned to look at Regulus. "Like you haven't flirted your arse off at Beauxbatons."

Regulus snorted but didn't dignify the comment with a response. Merlin, if Barty even knew…

A hush fell over the pitch as Dumbledore strode onto the field, his robes billowing slightly in the wind. He reached the center with an air of quiet authority, raising his hands to command the attention of the assembled students and guests. His voice, amplified by magic, echoed across the pitch.

"Welcome, students, staff, and honored guests, to the first match of the Unity Tournament!" he began, his tone warm and welcoming. "It is a rare privilege to host this gathering of magical schools, and I hope you will all embrace the opportunity to forge connections and celebrate each other's talents."

His speech was brief but effective, drawing enthusiastic applause from the stands. As the clapping subsided, Dumbledore gestured toward one end of the pitch. A line of Durmstrang students began their march down the field, their dark red robes cutting striking figures against the green grass. They moved with precise discipline, their steps perfectly in sync. At the same time, on the opposite side, the Beauxbatons delegation began their descent, their familiar pale blue uniforms standing out gracefully.

Regulus couldn't help but notice his friends' reactions. Mulciber was openly ogling the Beauxbatons girls, while Barty sat up straighter, his eyes darting between the two groups, clearly in awe. Evan and Avery nodded cheerfully at the sight of the students now filing into the

stands. The foreign students mingled with Hogwarts students almost immediately, chatting animatedly as they found seats.

Regulus settled back in his seat, letting his gaze wander over the crowd. He couldn't help but feel a flicker of unease as he saw Potter and Sirius again, their heads bent together as they exchanged quiet words. This time, neither of them noticed him, though his stomach tightened as his gaze shifted to the werewolf sitting beside them, his face calm yet somehow unnervingly watchful. Behind Potter were two girls who Regulus recognised as someone Macdonald and someone McKinnon, the latter clearly leaning into Potter a tad too amicably.

Just as Regulus was shaking off the sight, two loud, delighted shrieks pierced through the growing chatter.

"Reg! I've found him, Élise!"

He turned just in time to see Solène waving dramatically, her wide grin unmistakable as she motioned for Élise to join her. They approached with purpose, their striking appearances making them impossible to miss among the crowd.

"Regulus," Solène said warmly, throwing her arms around him and kissing his cheek in greeting, "there you are!"

Élise followed suit, leaning in to kiss his other cheek with equal affection before the two girls turned their attention to his group of friends, who were clearly unprepared for this turn of events. Solène, without hesitation, nudged Mulciber and Avery aside with surprising efficiency, ignoring their gawking expressions as she slid gracefully into the seat beside Regulus.

She lounged against his side as if she'd known him for years, her posture relaxed and confident. Élise took the other side, mirroring her best friends' posture.

It didn't go unnoticed by Regulus that his friends' jaws seemed to drop collectively.

To be fair, he couldn't entirely blame them – Solène and Élise were both at least three years older and undeniably stunning. Élise's fiery red hair spilled over her shoulders, a vivid contrast to the pale blue of her Beauxbatons robes, while Solène's piercing blue eyes matched the color of her uniform so perfectly it was almost distracting.

Mulciber finally shook his head, muttering under his breath, "You've

got to be joking."

Barty leaned closer to Regulus, his voice low but carrying an edge of disbelief. "What *exactly* did you do at Beauxbatons, Black? Charm half the school?"

Regulus shot him a withering look before turning to his companions. "Solène, Élise, these are my friends — Barty, Evan, Dimitri, Bertram, and Severus."

Solène gave a polite nod to the group but didn't seem particularly interested. Élise followed her lead, her attention fixed firmly on Regulus.

Barty muttered something else, but his words were drowned out by the deafening roar that erupted from the crowd. Regulus turned his gaze to the pitch just in time to see the players flying into position, the Quidditch match officially beginning.

The energy in the stands surged as the crowd leaned forward, the atmosphere electric. Solène, still comfortably pressed against Regulus's side, grinned and murmured in his ear, "I hope your Hogwarts players can keep up. I've got high expectations for this match."

Regulus allowed himself a small smirk, his focus shifting to the game. This was going to be fun.

*****

The match was intense. Durmstrang's chasers worked in near-perfect unison, their relentless attacks putting evident pressure on Maxim. Still, Maxim's performance was nothing short of extraordinary — his saves were sharp, calculated, and often drew gasps of admiration from the crowd. Beauxbatons, in turn, relied heavily on their tactical precision, severely testing Durmstrang's defenses. Eventually, the match reached its dramatic conclusion when Beauxbatons' Seeker, a wiry boy named Émile, dove into a spectacular dive and snatched the Snitch just inches ahead of his Durmstrang counterpart.

The Beauxbatons supporters erupted into cheers, their pale blue flags waving triumphantly. Regulus had sat on the edge of his seat the entire time, focusing on all the players and their weaknesses and strengths, pointedly ignoring all the sets of eyes that were boring into him as he laughed with Solène who was leaning into him amicably.

And the eyes were many; his friends all shot him envious and mildly confused glances, while – Regulus was sure – Isa was trying to penetrate him with the glare coming from her contemplative eyes, as Eira's group was eying him a bit too interested too. And surely, there was the sensation of Potter's eyes looking his way in the moments he wasn't completely immersed by the match.

No – he'd thought it better to focus on the match and let the discomfort of all the watchful eyes slide past him.

By the time everyone returned to the Great Hall, it was already late afternoon; the Hall had been magically enlarged to accommodate the sheer number of students, yet it still felt crowded. The enchanted ceiling mirrored the dusky sky, streaked with the warm hues of sunset. There were all sorts of foods scattered about on the tables – from traditional British scones with clotted cream and finger sandwiches, to rich French pâtisseries and smoked fish, dark rye bread and pickled vegetables.

Regulus sat at the Slytherin table with his usual group of friends, though their number had swelled. Solène and Élise flanked him, with his male friends around them, visibly captivated when Lucien and Maxim – who had just been playing on the pitch – joined them. They all seemed to get along well; the foreign students bantered with his friends at Hogwarts as if they'd known each other for years rather than mere hours.

Maxim and Lucien were in the middle of an animated retelling of the game; recounting Maxim's best saves with exaggerated flair.

"That one shot was going top corner," Barty said, pointing his fork at Maxim. "*How* did you get to it?"

Maxim smirked, his French accent thick. "Ah, mon ami, that is talent."

Élise rolled her eyes. "Talented or not, you almost missed that one, Maxim. Admit it."

The table burst into laughter, including Maxim himself, who held up his hands in mock surrender.

Regulus couldn't help but smile at the easy energy of the group, but unfortunately, around dinner time it was time for the foreign students to leave. Solène and Élise each gave Regulus a quick hug and a pair of cheek kisses before departing, drawing some meaningful gazes from Barty and Evan. Regulus and Potter were allowed to stay until later

that night under the pretext of ‘going over new tactics as a result of the match’ – it was not enough, though, to really partake in the celebration in the Slytherin common room, although Regulus didn’t really mind; when he left, the party was in full swing and Regulus was *very* happy not to be forced to witness Barty’s obvious moves on Celine near the fireplace and Evan clearly trying to impress one of Celine’s friends with an absurdly embarrassing dance.

He slipped away from the room without goodbyes.

*****

Back at Beauxbatons, Regulus realised he was utterly knackered. He barely registered Potter’s endless and energetic analyses of the match, and just nodded along and threw in a couple of poorly timed *ah’s* as he brushed his teeth, changed into pyjamas, and collapsed — without a word — into Potter’s bed. He fell asleep mid-sentence.

His rest was short-lived though – at some point in the night, he floated in that frustrating space between sleep and wakefulness, clinging desperately to unconsciousness while some force tried to pull him the other way.

It took him a second to realise this force was, in fact, Potter, who was tossing and turning, jostling the bed with restless energy.

Regulus, somewhere deep down realising this was now the second time in less than a day that his sleep was interrupted by Potter’s stupid nervous energy, groaned.

“Potter, if you don’t stop flopping around, I swear I’ll hex you.”

“I’m not flopping,” Potter whispered, sounding thoroughly agitated.

“You’re flopping. Like a dying fish.”

More tossing, more flopping. Regulus sighed heavily, briefly contemplating homicide or a silencing spell.

Then, Potter opened his mouth, and blurted out the apparent reason for his turmoil.

“I snogged a girl.”

Regulus blinked into the dark, his exhaustion shielding him from the full absurdity of the moment.

“Er — good for you, I suppose?” he groaned.

“No, you’re not listening—” Potter sat up, dragging the blanket with him. Regulus groaned again, long and suffering. “I snogged a girl. Last night. Hours ago. Or, well, she snogged *me*.”

Regulus, barely processing the information, pictured the girl who’d been swooning over Potter in the stands — something McKinnon. “Glad you survived,” he said, his voice thick with sleep. “Now can we *please* sleep?”

Potter’s wand flicked, casting a faint, golden glow over the room. Regulus squinted at the brightness, trying to bury his face in the pillow, but Potter’s voice pulled him back.

“Why aren’t you mad?” Potter demanded. His hair stuck out wildly, his expression an odd mix of indignation and confusion.

Regulus pried one eye open. “Mad about what?”

“You should be angry. Jealous. *Something*.”

Regulus rolled onto his back to squint at him properly. “Did you even like it? The snog?”

Potter grimaced. “No. It was… weird.”

“Then what exactly is the problem?” Regulus flopped back against the mattress with a sigh. “You didn’t like it, I don’t care, and we can all sleep soundly.”

“But would *you* have liked it?” Potter pressed. “If it was you snogging someone else?”

Regulus groaned, dragging himself into a sitting position. His hair stuck out in every direction, his glare half-hearted at best. “What is this really about, Potter?”

Potter hesitated, fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, tinged with insecurity.

“What if I… liked you… and you didn’t… like me as much?”

Regulus froze, no matter how annoyed he might have been at this exchange in the middle of the night, the earnest vulnerability, Potter’s insecurity; it tugged at Regulus’s heart.

“That’s absurd, Potter.”

Potter looked up, his eyes wide and unguarded. “How do I know that?”

Regulus sighed, his voice softening. “Because I’ve been sleeping next to you for weeks. You steal the blankets. You kick me in your sleep. Your hair is everywhere when you lie next to me.”

Potter blinked, clearly confused by this line of reasoning.

“And you keep waking me up with your *bloody* nervous energy,” Regulus added with a groan. “As if I’d tolerate any of that if I didn’t fancy you–”

The words slipped out before Regulus could stop them. Silence fell, both of them frozen. Potter’s eyes widened — then, to Regulus’s dread, his face broke into the widest, most ridiculous smile.

“You fancy me,” Potter said reverently.

“Potter—”

“No, you *fancy* me,” Potter laughed, delighted. “This is brilliant.”

Regulus rolled his eyes – *such* a bad move. Not that he didn’t want Potter to know – it should have been bloody obvious anyway, and Regulus had known for such a long time. No, the problem was that he was positive that Potter would *never* sleep again now that he’d heard Regulus saying it out loud.

Seriously, he looked like a child witnessing his first Quidditch match.

“Say it again,” Potter whispered, leaning closer, his grin softening into something warmer.

Regulus exhaled a quiet laugh. “Go to sleep, Potter.”

“No.” Potter shook his head, still grinning. “Just once more.”

Regulus groaned, flopping back onto the pillow. “Fine. Yes, I fancy you. Now, bloody hell, can we *please*—”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by Potter surging forward, capturing his mouth in an eager, uncoordinated kiss. It was all teeth and enthusiasm at first, perfectly matching Potter’s nearly exploding enthusiasm. Slowly, though, it softened, their movements syncing as

Regulus shifted closer, his hands cradling Potter's face.

As the kiss deepened, Potter let out a small, helpless sound that sent a shiver down Regulus's spine. For all of Potter's chaos, his unfiltered, almost childlike exuberance was bloody intoxicating. Regulus slid his hands down Potter's sides, savouring the way Potter's breath hitched beneath his touch, until he guided him gently onto his back.

Their lips parted briefly, Potter staring up at him, breathless, his hair a wild halo against the pillow. "What—?"

"Shh," Regulus whispered, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of Potter's mouth. His hands slid lower, tracing the lines of Potter's chest and sides, finally resting on his hips. He took his time, his lips brushing along Potter's jaw, down the curve of his neck, taking in every shiver and sharp inhale beneath him.

Regulus's gaze never left Potter's, who watched him with an expression that softened, brows lifting in surprise, lips parting as he realised what Regulus intended.

"Oh," Potter whispered, his hands tangling in Regulus's hair, his voice breaking on a laugh that turned into a gasp. "You're —*oh* , you're —"

Regulus laughed softly against his skin, the sound low and warm. His kisses drifted lower, slow and deliberate, trailing down Potter's collarbone, then lower still, over the curve of his chest and the dip of his stomach. Each touch, each press of his lips, was purposeful, his fingers mapping Potter's body with gentle devotion.

Potter's breath hitched, his hands tightening in Regulus's hair, pulling slightly as he arched under him. Regulus hummed, the sound vibrating against Potter's skin. He looked up briefly, meeting Potter's gaze — the wonder, the vulnerability there making his chest ache.

As his kisses trailed lower, Regulus's hands shifted, one sliding along Potter's side, the other curling over his hip to steady him. He paused, letting his lips linger just above the waistband of Potter's pyjamas, a silent question hanging in the air. When Potter's hand slid from his hair to his face, cupping his cheek, his thumb brushing softly over his skin, Regulus took that as his answer.

Carefully, he guided the fabric lower, his lips brushing against the newly revealed skin, a soft exhale of warmth.

When he finally took Potter into his mouth, it was slow, intentional,

his movements deliberate as he savoured the way Potter's entire body tensed, the quiet, breathless sound that escaped him. Regulus moved with precision, exploring, learning what made Potter gasp, what made his body shudder.

Potter was falling apart beneath him, his head tilting back against the pillow, his lips parted, his chest heaving with ragged breaths. Regulus couldn't look away, caught between the intensity of Potter's expression and the sounds that he drew from his lips.

As Potter's breathing grew more erratic, Regulus drew back slightly, his hand replacing his mouth, stroking him with steady, deliberate movements. He leaned up, his breath trailing warm and hot over Potter's body until he reached his neck. His lips brushed against Potter's ear before he softly bit his earlobe.

"Come for me, James," he whispered, his voice low and intimate, the name slipping out like a secret.

Potter's head snapped toward him, his eyes darkening, a mix of awe and overwhelming pleasure crossing his features. The sound that followed was utterly wrecked, his body arching off the bed as he shuddered, coming undone beneath Regulus's touch. Regulus held him through it, his hand steady, his breath still warm against Potter's neck. As the waves subsided, Potter collapsed back onto the mattress, chest heaving, his face flushed and radiant.

For a long moment, he simply stared at Regulus, his lips curving into the softest, most genuine smile Regulus had ever seen.

"You called me James," Potter said finally, his voice breathless, full of wonder.

Regulus leaned in, pressing his forehead against Potter's, his lips twitching into a faint smile. "Yes, I guess I did."

Chapter 10: Of Mapping & Halls

Chapter Notes

TW: mentioning/depiction of (sexual) abuse.

Regulus entered November with two life missions; his task of locating Mathilde Legot's father and that of locating every sensitive spot on Potter's body.

The first task was crawling at an alarmingly slow pace. Regulus had pored over every genealogical chart in the library and unfortunately had to conclude that there was some information to be found about Mathilde Legot's uncles, but barely anything about her father. He had even combed through years of French newspapers, deciphering articles about minor scandals, business dealings – but all to no avail.

It was so bad that the thought of failure now loomed large in the back of his mind. Apart from the utter shame; him failing his first mission, the rookie, the youngster, his voice barely broken, proving them all right, proving he was worthless, too young to be of any use for the cause — he wondered; would there be consequences? Would he be punished? Regulus knew that the only resort he still had, the only card he could still play, was Potter. But boy, did he feel reluctant to use him; he knew he'd have to at some point, but every instinct screamed to delay it – postpone it. Push it further down the road.

As for the second life mission, well — that was progressing exceptionally well. Regulus had come to realise that there was probably nothing more captivating than Potter's reaction to Regulus's hands or lips on his body. So, all the time left after classes, homework, training, *Pure Quill* meetings and his quests in the library, his major activity was mapping every inch of Potter's body and taking in the most mesmerising sounds that he made in response to it.

Potter, with his wide eyes and eager responses, was a map Regulus intended to chart in its entirety – he was a puzzle he desperately wanted to complete, a masterpiece he burned to paint. So, every moment stolen after classes, between homework, after training sessions, or late into the night was dedicated to exploration, puzzling and painting. His fingertips became cartographers, trailing paths and figures along Potter's skin, mapping the planes of his chest, the curve of his hips, the sensitive hollow where neck met shoulder. His lips followed, charting new territory, pressing against the line of Potter's

jaw, the flutter of his pulse, the sensitive skin of his neck.

So, on a Friday evening in the first week of November, this was exactly what they were doing. Their kisses were fevered, desperate, a heated rush of lips and hands everywhere. Regulus was pressed on top of Potter, both of them already bare-chested, breath coming in shallow gasps as Regulus rocked against Potter, feeling Potter's nails digging into the skin of his back. Potter let out a moan – the sound making Regulus's heart skip in time with the erratic beat of Potter's pulse. Regulus's fingers slid lower, tracing the line of Potter's stomach and hips, feeling the heat of him, the way he trembled. He had just hooked his fingers under Potter's waistband, when –

Knock.

A knock on the door.

The sound echoed sharply, like a bucket of cold water thrown over them. They both froze in place, wide eyes meeting between their faces, hearts pounding.

Then, again – *knock*. Louder this time.

Shit, someone was at the door – they had to move.

Regulus's mind raced, panic shooting through him in an instant. They were smart enough to cast protective charms, meaning the door couldn't be opened with a simple Alahomora, but Regulus still very much hated the idea of someone entering their private, safe space – especially at a moment like this.

Also, Regulus very much realised that the longer they waited to open the door, the more suspicious this situation would look.

So he scrambled off the bed, barely catching his balance as his legs tangled in the sheets. He grabbed the nearest shirt and yanked it on in one swift motion, tugging it over his head with a frantic jerk.

He was in such a panic and hurry that he didn't think about Potter for a second, and instead shrugged off the unease and opened the door.

No one had yet entered their dorm; Regulus and Potter kept their friends separate, so they'd all hang out in the common rooms or other public places, pointedly keeping their dorm for themselves alone. Regulus knew that some student knocking at the door had by now actually become overdue.

When Regulus opened the door, however, he realised it wasn't a student on the other side.

It was Professor Thorne.

Regulus froze, startled. "Professor?" he stammered, his voice barely steady. "What are you — what are you doing here?"

Thorne gave him that signature smirk. "Headmaster's orders," he said smoothly, his tone neutral but his gaze anything but. His eyes flicked over the dorm, taking in the scene behind Regulus.

Regulus knew it wasn't much, but in this moment, everything felt too much. Thorne's sharp eyes caught the details instantly: Potter, still bare-chested and sitting up on the bed, his hair a chaotic mess. Regulus truly hoped the notion of both their wand cases resting on Potter's nightstand went unnoticed; he was glad that Potter averted any attention to the specific scenery.

"Professor Thorne," he greeted.

"Ah," Thorne said lightly, his smirk deepening. "Potter. The Headmaster has asked me to fetch you as well."

Regulus's heart dropped into his stomach. His back stiffened as he turned toward Potter, his wide eyes meeting Potter's equally pale and panicked expression.

"Better dress into your robes," Thorne said casually, stepping back from the door. "I'll wait outside."

The door clicked shut, and silence filled the room.

Regulus walked toward Potter, his voice a frantic whisper. "What the *hell* is going on?"

Potter was already grabbing his shirt, his movements quick but clumsy. "I — I have no idea. What does he mean, *fetch us*? Why us?"

"I don't know," Regulus whispered, his heart racing in panic. He pulled his robes over his head and fastened them with shaking hands. "But it can't be good – a Professor showing up at our dorm in the evening…."

Moments later, both of them stepped out into the hallway, still pale, still on edge. Thorne, leaning casually against the opposite wall,

pushed off and gave them a nod.

“What – what is this about, Professor?” Regulus asked, his voice clipped, barely concealing his panic.

Thorne’s smirk turned into a serious expression. “I don’t know. I was asked to bring you to Hogwarts. Something to do with a family matter.”

Regulus’s breath hitched. His family? His mind immediately jumped to the worst — had they found out? Did Mother know? It was the only logical explanation for both him *and* Potter being summoned for a ‘family issue’.

“Normally, Beaumont would’ve handled this, but he’s not here at the moment,” Thorne continued as they began walking. “So that left me. Beyond that, I’m in the dark. All I know is it seemed urgent.”

Regulus barely registered their walk to Beaumont’s office – the only thing that truly stood out was Potter’s pale, sweating face as Regulus tossed the floo powder in the fireplace, sending him off to Hogwarts.

*****

Now, if being interrupted mid make-out session with Potter by Professor Thorne wasn’t already surreal enough, the scene took a turn for the downright absurd the moment Regulus stepped out of the fireplace.

In Dumbledore’s office, besides the Headmaster himself, were Slughorn and McGonagall – probably representing their Houses’ students, a man Regulus vaguely recognised, Sirius, Isa, and … Mother.

Regulus, already unhealthily pale, felt the last drop of blood drain from his face at her sight. She sat with her usual strict and glacial composure, her hair pulled back into its signature severe bun, her sharp eyes locking onto his the moment he entered the room. Next to her was the vaguely familiar man, and across from them, Sirius lounged in a chair, managing to look both anxious and somehow annoyed, his expression shifting to mild amusement as soon as he saw Regulus.

“Mother,” Regulus croaked, his throat suddenly dry.

“Regulus,” she answered crisply.

“What — what is going on?” he managed, darting a glance at Isa, who was hovering awkwardly near Potter and the Heads of Houses.

Dumbledore motioned for him to sit. The arrangement was bizarre: Mother, Sirius, Regulus, and the familiar man seated at a table, while the rest of the group stood off to the side, looking as utterly uncomfortable as he felt. The odd formality of it all — the rigid seating, the chilly air radiating from Mother — made him feel like he’d stepped back into his childhood, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Sirius in front of her, waiting for the inevitable berating to unfold.

Still, the setup made no sense. If they’d somehow discovered his … situation with Potter, why was Isa here? And why was he sitting at a desk with Sirius and Mother instead of being dragged out for a private crucifixion at the wand of Mother?

The silence stretched unbearably until, at last, Mother broke it.

“Your Uncle Alphard has died,” she said flatly.

Regulus blinked, the words landing like a slap. “What?” he blurted. “What happened? How?”

“It appears to have been his heart,” she replied, her tone clipped. “He was found dead in the drawing room.”

Sirius made a noise that was halfway between a snort and a laugh. “Figures,” he muttered, not even bothering to mask his tone.

Regulus turned to him sharply, but the faint twinkle in Sirius’s eye threw him off – the look when he was recalling some private joke.

And then it hit him: the bet. Years ago, they’d argued over how Alphard would go. Sirius had sworn his excessive smoking, drinking, and fondness for rich food would get him in the end, while Regulus had bet on Lord Prance or Mr. Houdini offing him eventually.

And somehow – perhaps it was the built up tension and the eventual relief that at least it wasn’t about him and Potter – Regulus couldn’t hold it. Regulus clamped a hand over his mouth, his shoulders trembling with the effort of not laughing. Sirius, biting his lip hard enough to turn white, looked equally on the verge of losing it.

Mother’s glare snapped between them, sharp as a whip. “Is this funny to you?” she demanded icily.

“Not at all,” Sirius said, managing a tone so steady it was almost convincing, though the twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

Regulus wisely said nothing, choosing instead to focus entirely on composing himself, though his shoulders still trembled faintly.

Sirius leaned back in his chair with a mock-serious expression. “Right – such a tragic loss. To be honest, he’s one of the few of you lot I actually liked.” He raised his eyebrows. “But, really, what am I doing here?”

Mother’s lips thinned dangerously, but before she could launch into a tirade, Dumbledore, definitely sensing the tension, cleared his throat.

“Ah, there are some legal matters to address, Mr. Black. That is why Mr. Darrow, the family lawyer, is here. Since Regulus is still a minor, his legal guardian — your mother — must be present. You, of course, are of age and technically uninvolved in House Black’s affairs.” His blue eyes twinkled faintly, as Regulus suddenly realised that his brother had come of age the week prior. “However, I thought you both might appreciate the presence of your closest friends for support.”

Regulus glanced over at Potter and Isa, standing awkwardly to one side with the professors. Potter looked torn between relief and acute discomfort at the surreal family drama unfolding before him. He kept his eyes fixed determinedly anywhere but on Mother, who was radiating a deadly chill in his direction – he was probably afraid to die at the very spot if he made eye contact, much like the deadly stare of a basilisk.

“Legal matters?” Sirius echoed skeptically.

Mr. Darrow, a stooped but sharp-eyed wizard in well-tailored robes, adjusted his spectacles. “Yes, inheritance matters, to be precise.”

Sirius snorted. “I thought I was disowned?”

Darrow cleared his throat, his voice carefully neutral. “Your Uncle Alphard took… specific steps to safeguard a portion of his wealth. While you are not entitled to his estate or properties, he has left you precisely fifty percent of his vault at Gringotts.”

The room fell into stunned silence.

Mother's expression tightened into something almost imperceptibly livid. "Take it for you to conspire with him behind our backs," she hissed, her composure cracking just enough to let venom seep through.

Sirius, blinking in shock, recovered quickly. "What the—? No! I don't want anything to do with this family's filthy money."

Darrow raised a hand, placating. "It is yours by magical law. You are under no obligation to use it, but it is in your name and accessible at your discretion."

Sirius's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing. "I'll find a way to give it away. Or burn it."

Before Mother could explode, Darrow turned to Regulus, consulting his papers. "As for you, Mr. Black, your uncle has left certain properties in your custodianship. While the bulk of his wealth and assets revert to your other uncle, Alphard's magical will has designated you as the custodian of two estates: Black Manor and Seacliff Hall."

It was as though someone had plunged a knife straight into Regulus's chest. His throat tightened, and his heart hammered painfully in his ribcage as his eyes widened in stunned disbelief.

"What?" he choked out, barely able to breathe.

Sirius was quicker, his chair scraping loudly as he shot to his feet, his hands slamming on the table. "*Seacliff Hall* to Regulus?" His voice dripped with outrage. "What a sick — a twisted, *sick* joke!"

Regulus was too distracted by the impact this information seemed to have on his body to truly take in how Sirius came to his defences.

He was also too distracted by the news to take into account the bewildered gazes from the others present; Isa and Potter exchanging confused glances, the teachers visibly concerned and Dumbledore looking as contemplative as ever.

Naturally, Mother wanted to chip something in – probably in order to berate her eldest son's behaviour, but she was cut short by the attorney.

Darrow, ever professional, looked mildly alarmed but did not waver. "I assure you, Mr. Black, there is no error. The properties are in

Regulus's name as outlined in the magical will."

Sirius's face darkened, his lips curling into a snarl. "This family gets sicker every bloody day," he muttered, collapsing back into his chair with a bitter laugh.

Regulus was aware that it took too long for him to respond to the situation, but he was completely frozen – as if his body didn't know how to function properly anymore.

Seacliff Hall.

He was the magical custodian of *Seacliff Hall*.

He owned *Seacliff Hall* – the place of his biggest nightmares, of the sickest form of torture he'd had to endure. And he was its *owner*.

"I — I don't want it!" he blurted suddenly, his voice breaking as panic clawed its way into every syllable. "Take it, burn it — *I don't want it!*"

Darrow, ever composed, flinched at the raw emotion in Regulus's voice but remained professional. "Mr. Black, I understand this news is overwhelming. However, the estate is now yours. You may do with it as you wish, but by magical law, you'll need to formally claim it within seventy-two hours."

Sirius and Regulus exchanged a startled glance, both taken aback. "Claim it?" they asked in unison, though Regulus's voice was barely above a whisper.

Darrow inclined his head. "Yes. It takes roughly three days after the owner's death for the protective enchantments on the property to lift. Until then, only the rightful owner may enter and reapply the charms or make modifications to the protections."

The nausea that churned in Regulus's stomach intensified tenfold – he felt lightheaded, as though the world around him were swaying. He'd have to go back there. He'd have to walk through those halls again, breathe the air of that cursed place, hear the sound of the ocean and reawaken the shadows that had haunted him for so long.

"Well, let it rot then!" Sirius snapped, dragging Regulus's spiraling thoughts back to the present. "Who bloody cares?"

Mother's icy voice cut through the tension like a knife.

“No. That is not an option,” she said sharply, her tone brooking no argument. “The estate and all its contents belong to the family. Regulus will go there and ensure it remains protected. This is not up for debate.”

Sirius turned on her, his expression livid. “Of course, you’d make him do this. Why wouldn’t you? All you care about is the stupid wealth this sick family has to offer.”

Her sharp gaze snapped to Sirius. “You’ll watch your tone, Sirius,” she said, her voice like ice. “Regulus understands his responsibilities, even if you refuse to acknowledge yours.”

Regulus wanted to scream — to shout at both of them to just *shut up* — but his throat felt like it had been sewn shut. His hands clenched tightly against his sides, his breathing ragged.

“I’ll go,” he said quietly, cutting through the argument. His voice was hoarse, but it was enough to silence them both. “I’ll do it.”

He didn’t have a choice. He knew how magical properties worked; he’d read enough about estate protections to know the rules. Places like Black Manor and Seacliff Hall were cloaked in enchantments. It was only logical, really; you couldn’t just have anyone connected to the floo network showing up in your fireplace. No, you either had to be formally, magically dubbed a frequent visitor, or you’d have to know the address; this is also how Regulus had managed to floo to Potter Manor with Sirius nearly bleeding to death. He knew Potter’s address from the times he’d sent packages to Potter Manor on Sirius’s behalf – because, naturally, Sirius’s owl post had been strictly monitored.

And apparently, Black Manor and Seacliff Hall would now be protected for three days with only Regulus being able to access it, and he’d have to reapply the protections.

Sirius’s words echoed in his mind. What a sick, *twisted* joke.

And that’s what it felt like. A cruel legacy Uncle Alphard had left behind, forcing him to confront the worst place in his life, as if it were some sort of inheritance worth cherishing. The thought was enough to make him feel physically ill.

Darrow, sensing the fraught emotions in the room, spoke again. “That concludes the legal arrangements for now. We will provide the necessary documents for the transfer and further instructions.”

As the meeting broke up, Mother rose first, fixing Regulus with a cold, expectant look. “You will deal with this tomorrow,” she said simply, her words more command than suggestion. “I trust there will be no delays.”

Regulus gave a stiff nod, the effort of holding himself together costing him everything. She didn’t wait for a response, sweeping out of the room with Darrow on her heels.

Sirius, looking positively worried, leaned in. “Do you want me to come with you?” he asked, his voice soft. “I mean, I can’t accompany you the first time, but you could lift the enchantments and I could come after…”

Regulus swallowed hard, his throat painfully tight. “No,” he said finally, though his voice shook. “It’s better if I do it alone.”

Sirius’s jaw tightened, but he nodded as McGonagall and Slughorn approached them.

“Our deepest condolences,” McGonagall said softly, then turning to Regulus specifically. “If you wish to remain at Hogwarts tonight, you’re more than welcome. That also goes for you, Mr. Potter.”

Slughorn chimed in, giving an awkward but genuine smile. “Yes, yes, of course. No need to rush off — we can arrange anything you need.”

Regulus met Potter’s eyes, catching the conflict there — torn between staying with Sirius or going to Beauxbatons in case Regulus chose to. Next to him stood Isa, not having said a word so far, but her expression very clearly laying bare her concern.

“I’ll go to Beauxbatons,” he said quietly. “I’d like to be alone for a bit.”

Potter took the hint and nodded. “I’ll stay with Sirius,” he said, though his tone carried unspoken words of worry.

Regulus turned away, his steps heavy as he walked to the fireplace in Dumbledore’s office. The green flames roared to life, but he hesitated for just a moment, his hands trembling. Then he stepped forward, the flames consuming him as he disappeared.

*****

As one could expect, Regulus slept terribly. It was the first time in

weeks he slept alone; he had opted for Potter's bed though — hoping that the scent of him would give him some comfort. He almost laughed at the thought — if Potter knew about it, he'd have a swooning smile plastered onto his face for days.

Lying in the bed, his face purposely in Potter's pillow, he had a hard time making sense of his feelings. The idea that Uncle Alphard was dead — it was strange; he didn't feel anything, no sorrow, no grief, no sadness. Wasn't he supposed to feel sad at least? But somehow it felt like a strange dream — a distant thing that didn't feel real.

He also felt relieved that the reason for being summoned to Hogwarts hadn't been him and Potter; and well, it sickened him he felt *relieved* and that he apparently felt comfort in his Uncle's death meaning his secret was still safe. On top of this, he felt like reality was finally catching up on him — what if he and Potter *had* been the reason? Weren't people bound to find out? And if they didn't; what was their future? What were they doing — what had they gotten themselves into?

Still, rising high above this, claiming the throne of his emotions and thoughts and nerves, was the suffocating feeling of fear.

Fear of going back there. Fear of what it might do to him. Fear of what it could possibly set in motion.

After tossing and turning for what felt like hours, Regulus finally gave up. He rose from the bed, walked over to his own, and, without a second thought, took the first Dreamless Sleep Potion he'd had in weeks.

*****

It is a strange thing, the relationship between scent and memory. Regulus had come across the notion much over the holidays, when he was diving into the art of Occlumency. Apparently, the part of the brain responsible for processing smells is directly connected to the part housing emotion and memory – meaning that a certain smell can evoke memories and feelings so raw, so immediate as if dug up from the very marrow of the past. Smells can pull memories from places so deep inside that not even the strongest Elixir of Verdant Recollection potion can touch.

When Regulus stepped out of the fireplace into the drawing room of Seacliff Hall, the familiar scent of smoke and aged wood hit him like a punch in the gut. It was a sharp, bitter combination that immediately

sent a flood of images and sounds racing to the forefront of his mind – images of a time before the house had been left empty, before everything had taken a turn for the worst – or the better.

All of a sudden, he was a child again, sitting at the end of the grand table, watching as his father, a cigar dangling from his lips, exhaled smoke in thick, languid clouds. His Uncle Cygnus sat beside him, speaking in low, lazy tones about matters Regulus couldn't understand. The deep, musty scent of cigars mixed with the faint scent of the polished oak furniture filled the room. And then, suddenly, Sirius pulled open the kitchen door and motioned for him to come.

"C'mon, Reg, let's go," he whispered, shooting their father and uncle secretive glances. "No one's in the kitchen now, we can nick the cookies."

Regulus's lips twitched, just for a moment at the memory of his brother's mischief. But it passed as quickly as it came, replaced with the scent of clean, fresh parchment, taking him back to his childhood again, although now some years later.

He shuffled into the drawing room, taking in the sight of Mother – sitting at the table, her fingers deftly writing a letter, her attention sharp. She looked up as he entered, her gaze drifting over him investigatively.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked, her voice cool but with a caring edge. It was the first time she'd looked at him in what felt like days, her eyes sharp but warm in a way he didn't understand.

Regulus nodded quickly, unable to meet her gaze. But then her attention shifted, narrowing in on his neck. The red spot. The mark. Her voice grew tighter. "What's that on your neck?"

Regulus froze. The memory slammed into him — how the Governor's teeth had sunk into his skin, marking him like property. The fresh memories of the governor's breath, thick and hot, the hands that held him down, the control, the violation of all that was supposed to be.

"Nothing," Regulus muttered, his voice so small as he felt. "I bumped into something."

His throat tightened, but it wasn't enough. The words burned like acid in his mouth. He almost blurted it out — how the Governor had done it with his teeth, how he had marked him like a thing, for everyone to see; for everyone to see that he was his and his alone. Regulus's

stomach twisted at the thought. He felt the conflicting thoughts seizing him, and was relieved when Mother returned to his letter – relieved that she'd chosen for him whether to share or not.

Regulus shuddered, overcome by the instant and overwhelming need to push the memories away. He glanced down at the roll of parchment on the table before him – probably delivered by owl – explaining how to execute his task of reinforcing the enchantments, ensuring that the magical protections were intact. It wasn't very hard; one just had to be very precise and follow all the steps strictly. He recognised Cissy's handwriting as he completed every step set out on the parchment, until his task was done. All in all, the task he had dreaded so; going back to Seacliff Hall, reinforcing the protective charms, had taken a mere thirty minutes or so.

Now, he could've left it there; he was done, after all. He could go to Black Manor, do the same there, and return to Beauxbatons. The task would be complete, and he could put this place behind him. There was no reason to stay, no reason to linger in this haunted house.

And yet, some part of him refused to leave.

An unknown force, a feeling he couldn't explain, lured him onward. Regulus found himself walking through the familiar hallways — through the library, past the morning room, into the kitchen. The house had a stillness to it, as if it had been abandoned for years; the dust lay thick on the furniture, the once-pristine rooms now disheveled, forgotten. Everything was the same, and yet – yet everything was different.

Finally, he reached his old bedroom.

He stood at the door for a long moment before slowly opening it, stepping inside. His fingers brushed across the desk, the worn wood smooth under his fingertips. The room looked exactly as it had when he was younger, and yet it felt so alien to him. The memories, those moments, loomed heavy and suffocating in the air. The bed — his bed — looked untouched, yet every part of it was soaked with the things he'd tried to forget. Just the thought of all the things that had been done to him in this bed, all the filthy words and truths that had been whispered between these sheets, the praise and love so devilishly intertwined with the violation and hurt, all the times he wished he'd died in his sleep… It felt so distant, so unreal…

Until that scent hit him sharp and relentless – musk and cigars.

Regulus's heart slammed against his ribs as he took in a shuddering breath.

It was as if he was back there – lying frozen beneath the Governor's touch, his hands on his skin, rough and unyielding, guiding him to places he didn't want to go. And the voice – his breath against his ear, voice smooth as silk. *You're so wonderful, Regulus* . And then later, as the numbness has reached its peak, his mind completely drifted away, dissociated from the sick reality he was forced into, *Remember, darling, it's our secret right? Our little secret.*

Another memory swept over his mind; again, lying in the same bed, the same sickening smell of cigars and musk in the air, feeling the same crushing weight of shame as he confessed he didn't want to do it anymore, that it felt wrong, and the same smooth voice, pointing out how he was special, different, exceptional. And the way the words twisted inside him, bile and shame rising in his throat, the knowledge that he had gotten used to it, the knowledge that he had been defiled until the very last pore of his body – in stark contrast to his brother, who was still untouched, still pure.

He felt a jolt of nausea so strong it was a miracle he didn't vomit right on the floor. Regulus turned around, ready to flee the room, when something caught his eye. A blouse – hanging in the closet, partially ajar.

His throat tightened. He recognised it immediately. It had been *his*.

The fabric was soft, silken. He reached out, fingers trembling, and touched the blouse. The family crest was embroidered into the hem — the crest of the Governor's family. Regulus's stomach churned. The nausea hit him again, along with a flood of anger, of pure, blind rage. How he hated everything – *everything* about him. And how he hated himself – for he was partially *his*, too. Every patch of skin ever touched, every grazed, ever claimed by him, making Regulus part of his governor. Regulus's hand shook as he took out the blouse, staring at it for a long, long moment. Then, in a blur of motion, he pointed his wand at it and set it aflame.

He desperately needed air – he felt like he was going to faint if he stayed inside the house a second longer, so he sped out of it, the air outside hitting him like a slap in the face; cold, salty and sharp.

His legs moved almost on instinct, carrying him to the beach. The wind whipped his hair around his face and the salt air filled his lungs;

the same salt air he had breathed in so many times, for years, the air he had come to detest with every part of his body, every depth of his soul. The air he had taken in on the good days, the days he played around with Sirius and went with him into the water or the days that the governor took him out on a little boat; but also the air he had taken in on the bad days, the days he wondered whether he could drown himself.

Oh, how he hated the beach.

And then he felt it again – the nausea rising in his throat. However, this time he couldn't stop it. He dropped to his knees as his stomach lurched, emptying everything in him, everything spilling onto the sand, like he wanted all of this – all of the feelings, all of the memories – to spill here, leaving his heart and mind empty at last.

For a long time, he just sat there, breathless, eyes closed, taking in the suffocating smell of the beach he abhorred so.

And then he sighed, turned on his heels and made his way to the fireplace. He never, ever wanted to set foot here again.

*****

He went to Black Manor too — a visit undoubtedly more pleasant than to Seacliff Hall, although the Manor did harbour the corpse of his dead uncle in his bedroom, a room he thus pointedly avoided. Instead, he performed the same rounds of enchantments and spells before making his way to the drawing room. In a sudden emotional surge, he opened the liquor cabinet and poured himself a generous amount of Firewhiskey. He took a long gulp, lifting the glass in an unspoken toast to his uncle's memory. Then he slouched onto the sofa, drained the rest of the bottle in several more gulps, and grabbed a second one to give to Sirius later. It was exactly what his uncle would've wanted: his nephews drinking his finest Firewhiskey in honour of him.

Back at Beauxbatons, Regulus trudged down the palace corridors to his dorm. It wasn't the Firewhiskey making his legs unsteady — though it certainly didn't help — but rather the exhaustion and the suffocating weight of the memories from that day. He reached the dormitory door, hesitating for a moment before pushing it open, and just as he wondered whether Potter would be there or still at Hogwarts, his question was answered. Potter was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head snapping to the door as Regulus entered and his expression shifting from relief to concern in an instant.

He was wearing that Muggle turtleneck which made him look criminally handsome.

“I was wondering when you’d get back,” Potter said, his voice light but edged with worry.

Regulus didn’t answer, his movements jerky and unfocused as he entered. He shrugged off his cloak and placed the Firewhiskey bottle on the small table by the fireplace. Potter eyed it curiously, but Regulus didn’t offer any explanation.

As he changed into his pyjamas, Potter broke the silence.

“Did you go there? Did you do it?” he asked, a mix of curiosity and concern in his voice.

Regulus nodded stiffly, avoiding his eyes.

Potter studied him for a moment, his eyebrows furrowing. “Are you drunk?”

“No,” Regulus answered earnestly, although he felt some effects of the Firewhiskey; he was hardly an experienced drinker, after all.

“Are you okay?”

The question hung in the air unanswered as Regulus paced the room, aimless and restless. He had no idea what to answer to that question – he was *so* many things, but not okay. He was angry – angry about all the stuff that had happened to him, angry that it was still taking its toll, *angry* that his stupid Uncle had left the House of his sickest nightmares in his hands, had forced him to go there, to face all his demons, to face all the sick, twisted things that he’d had to endure there.

He was sad, sad that his Uncle was apparently dead – but even more sad that he didn’t have Sirius at his side, feeling it with him, for only he understood. And part of him, part of him was sad when his mind flashed back to the gruesome picture; the picture snapping the ultimate fate of his governor. Because, despite everything, part of his heart still belonged to him. Just a very, very small and tiny part, but a part nonetheless. And it made him sick – sick that he felt that way, that he felt sorry for what had happened to him, the torture he must’ve undergone before meeting his painful, final end.

It was just too much. Too fucking much to put into words.

As Regulus was pacing the dorm, suddenly Potter stood, stepping into his path and coming to an abrupt stop in front of him. He interlocked his eyes with Regulus's, serious and determined.

"Punch me, Black."

Regulus stopped, blinking at him as though he hadn't heard properly. "What?"

Potter crossed his arms, his jaw set. "I said, punch me."

Regulus stared at him, incredulous. Perhaps he *was* drunk…

"Potter – what the hell are you talking about?"

Potter smirked. "You Blacks are all the same — sure, you're more composed than Sirius, but when it comes to emotional regulation, you're all a bloody mess. Better to get it out now than bottle it up and explode later." He shrugged. "So, punch me."

Regulus raised an eyebrow, confusion flickering across his face. "You're insane."

Potter's grin widened. "C'mon, Black. Throw me a good punch. Anywhere you want — just steer clear of the face and, well, the sensitive parts."

Regulus hesitated, but something in Potter's expression — a mix of challenge and concern — unlocked something reckless in him. And perhaps it was the Firewhiskey, too. So, with a muttered curse, he swung a weak, awkward punch at Potter's shoulder.

Potter winced dramatically but grinned. "That's it? Selwyn could do better than that. Try again."

Regulus's jaw tightened as he rolled his eyes. His second punch was harder, more deliberate.

"Better," Potter said, his voice goading. "But I know you've got more in you. Come on, Black — hit me like you mean it."

Regulus's next punch came with real force, a flare of anger cutting through the fog of exhaustion. Potter staggered back slightly, but instead of anger, he was laughing — and that laugh — carefree, maddening and fucking beautiful, too — only fueled the fire.

"Harder," Potter said, his voice firm. "Pour it out. All of it."

And Regulus did. He punched Potter's chest again and again, the blows landing harder and faster, fueled by something ugly and raw. Potter took it without complaint, his gaze steady and kind, a silent invitation to let it all spill out.

Regulus laughed, weakly, as he kept punching. He wasn't sure what he was feeling — anger, grief, sadness? It was all a mess. But it was coming out, bit by bit. He didn't even notice when the laughter died and the punches turned desperate, shaking him to his core.

His chest heaved, his vision blurred, and then, suddenly he broke. Suddenly he wasn't punching anymore, but crying.

Regulus's knees buckled as his body gave way, and he collapsed into Potter's arms. The tears came, violent and unrestrained, crashing through him in waves. He cried, body trembling, as Potter's arms held him close, steady and warm.

"It's okay," Potter murmured, his voice soft and soothing. "Let it out."

Regulus buried his face in Potter's shoulder, too ashamed to look him in the eye. Potter just held him — no questions, no judgment, so genuinely kind like only he could be — simply stroking his back, offering silent comfort.

After what felt like hours, Regulus was utterly spent, emotionally and physically. He was empty — but a kind of empty that was actually a relief. Exhausted, he climbed into Potter's bed, curling up in the warmth beside him. Without a word, Potter pulled the blankets over them both, holding him close as Regulus drifted off into an empty, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 11: Of Baking & Brownies

The next day, Regulus woke up groggily and feeling slightly detached from reality. He knew Potter felt it — how he'd moved away from him as soon as he woke up, how he had carefully dodged Potter's hand reaching out to him.

He just couldn't — there was something very unsettling about the idea of kissing Potter and sitting in the room with Bellatrix within the span of an hour.

Potter, though, hadn't shown any reaction to Regulus's behaviour other than a contemplative flash across his eyes.

Regulus changed into his finest robes in silence, feeling Potter's gaze on him all the time, which he purposely ignored. It wasn't until he'd put on his shoes and pocketed his wand when Potter broke the silence.

"Any idea when you get back?"

"No," he answered. "I'll be back for dinner, I suppose. It will be a … small thing."

Potter nodded. "Alright. I am going to Hogwarts for a bit. See you tonight?"

Regulus, at last, looked in Potter's eyes. He looked reassuring and kind.

"Sure."

*****

The funeral was a small, painfully awkward affair. Only the closest family members attended, and given Uncle Alphard's last-minute surprise of secretly leaving half of his Gringotts vault to Sirius, Regulus was genuinely surprised that Mother and Bellatrix had shown up at all. Sure, normally a Black family funeral would be a grand, public event, so the intimate setting spoke volumes about Mother's hard feelings; but for her and Bellatrix to even be there must have been a monumental concession and definitely not one done out of grief.

The only ones who seemed genuinely upset by his passing were Cissy and Aunt Druella. The rest either lingered awkwardly as Uncle

Alphard was lowered into the ground – like Regulus, Father, Uncle Cygnus and Lucius – or stood feet away, eyes fixed on the horizon, like Mother, ruminating on her brother's ultimate betrayal and Bellatrix, smoldering in silent fury over the inheritance.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise; traditional inheritance laws dictated that all familial wealth would pass to the closest male heir, bypassing women entirely. That meant everything Alphard hadn't left to Sirius now belonged to Bellatrix's father and would eventually pass to Regulus. Still, although these laws were part of the traditions she was actively fighting for, probably willing to die for, even, it must have been have been a particularly bitter pill for her to swallow that she was financially tethered to her husband, and that, on top of that, half of Uncle Alphard's vault went to her blood traitor cousin and that Regulus – at the age of fifteen – had become the custodian of two estates and had now officially become more wealthy than her.

After the ceremony —which frankly hardly deserved the name, given its brevity and utter lack of sentiment — they returned to Black Manor for supper; a horrendous ordeal steeped in awkward silences while Aunt Druella and Cissy kept on trying to fill the void, their efforts only making the awkwardness more pronounced.

"It feels so strange, doesn't it?" Cissy offered softly, her tone almost apologetic. "That we won't see him again. And the house…" She glanced at her mother. "It feels so empty now."

Aunt Druella nodded in agreement, her voice wistful. "He always had a way of filling a room, didn't he? Always had a surprising thing to say–"

Bellatrix let out a sharp, derisive laugh. "Oh, yes. The biggest surprise of all — betraying us and tossing half of his fortune to his blood-traitor nephew Sirius. How *incredibly* surprising, he was."

The air grew taut, as if everyone at the table were collectively holding their breath. Even Lucius, usually so composed, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. No one dared respond, especially not with Mother in the room. Regulus slowly sank further in his seat, focusing on his spoon pointedly.

After dinner, the family dispersed – Regulus, in an attempt to avoid his family members, decided to peek a glance at his room. He had just entered when the door creaked open again, leaving Bellatrix to saunter in, her gaze locking onto him like a predator eyeing its prey.

Her lips curled into a mean smile.

“So, where is your lovely companion, Isadora, dear cousin?” she asked, her tone dripping with mock sweetness.

Regulus looked up, his expression carefully neutral. “We’re not married,” he replied. “Why would she be here?” He then realised that Bellatrix *was* married and that her husband wasn’t there. “Why is *your husband* not here, though?” he asked, genuinely interested in what could be interesting enough for him not to accompany his wife to an event like this.

Apparently, though, the question hit a nerve. Bellatrix’s mask slipped, her expression hardening. “Busy,” she snapped, her tone curt. “Not that it’s any of your concern.”

Her gaze grew vicious. Just as Regulus realised he had made a mistake, Bellatrix leaned forward, her smile returning, sharp and wolfish. “How was your visit to Seacliff Hall?”

Regulus stiffened.He could feel the shift in the atmosphere, the way the room seemed to constrict. “It was fine,” he said, his voice carefully controlled. “I didn’t stay long.”

“Oh, what a pity,” Bellatrix said, her tone saccharine. She tilted her head, as if sharing a secret. “Tell me, Reggie — did the bloodstains ever come out of the carpet?”

Regulus frowned, his confusion and shock genuine. “W-what?”

“The bloodstains,” Bellatrix repeated, her tone sweet and mocking. “You see, we started the party there. In your bedroom. Very symbolic, don’t you think? He certainly spent more time there than in his own.”

Regulus’s breath caught, and his stomach twisting violently as he froze to the ground completely.

Still, Bellatrix pressed on, her words cruel and deliberate.

“We could’ve killed him in seconds, of course, but where’s the fun in that?” She smirked, her voice turning darkly theatrical. “Eventually, I took him to the cellar at my house. Oh, we've had the *best* of times there. He could hardly beg by the time I finished the job.”

“That’s enough, Bella,” Cissy’s voice cut through the tension as she stepped into the room. Her face was pale, tight with shock, though her

composure held.

Bellatrix waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, come now, Cissy. Regulus doesn’t mind, do you, dear?” Her smile was venomous. She leaned closer to Regulus, her voice dropping into a malicious purr. “You hated him just as much as we did. Or—” she paused, her eyes gleaming with malice, “—did you perhaps not hate him as much as you pretended? Did you perhaps… enjoy him?”

Regulus felt the bile rise in his throat – his blood drained from his face, his pulse hammering in his ears. His palms grew damp, and a sharp, oppressive heat pressed against his temples.

The heartless, psychopathic *bitch*.

Still, somehow — he had no idea how — he managed to remain composed. Tilting his head, he let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “You’re in *my* house now, Bellatrix,” he said, his voice cold and cutting. “If you want to discuss sordid matters like this, I suggest you do so in your husband’s house. Or is that not an option?”

The jab landed with precision. Bellatrix’s smile vanished, replaced by a glare of pure venom. Cissy stiffened visibly, clearly uneasy that Regulus had risen to the bait.

As Regulus excused himself from the room, he felt a fleeting sense of victory – it was fleeting in the sense that he, deep down, had managed to touch a very sour spot and that, now he felt Bellatrix’s hateful, predatory gaze on his back, the dark ominous realisation settled over him that he’d one day pay for this exchange.

*****

On his way back to Beauxbatons, Regulus had a hard time shaking off Bellatrix’s words.

Did you perhaps not hate him as much as you pretend? Did you perhaps… enjoy him?

He truly hated her, hated her with every vein, pore and patch of his body. She was unrelenting, precise, utterly sadistic – always able to unearth the deepest, most private wounds. And she’d seen all of him; all of him in his mind, all of his darkest, most repulsive secrets. She’d seen it all, *felt* it all, and he knew she’d always seize the opportunity to use it against him. Like she’d tormented him throughout his life, with her vicious laugh, predatory eyes and manipulative games.

Oh, how he *hated* her.

By the time he reached the dormitory, his chest felt heavy with emotions he couldn't name – exhaustion, sadness, guilt, but mostly deep-rooted, myriad *fury*.

Inside, Potter was sitting on his bed, his eyes trailing over a piece of parchment, twirling his wand effortlessly between his fingers. As soon as Regulus stepped inside, Potter's gaze snapped to him, curiosity and concern flickering in his eyes. He put down his wand and the piece of parchment immediately.

"How was it?" Potter asked softly, his voice steady but gentle.

Regulus didn't answer – words felt heavy and useless. Just the thought of trying to put into words what passed through his mind was unbearable. He moved silently to his wardrobe, pulling out a fresh set of clothes. Potter watched him, his brow furrowing slightly, but he didn't press for a response.

Regulus changed quickly, his movements mechanical, then stepped into the small bathroom to brush his teeth. He realised he looked horrible – his reflection in the mirror looked pale and drawn, with deep shadows under his eyes.

He sighed.

When he returned from the bathroom, Potter was still lying in bed, now propped up on one elbow. His eyes followed Regulus as he approached, his expression softening with something Regulus couldn't quite name. Without a word, Regulus slipped under the covers, turning his back to him.

Potter shifted immediately, wrapping an arm around him in a gesture so natural it felt like breathing. He felt the warmth of Potter's body against his back and felt how Potter's hand rested lightly against his waist, his thumb brushing gently over the fabric of Regulus's shirt in an absent, comforting motion.

Regulus closed his eyes, letting the quiet of the room wash over him. For a moment, he focused solely on the steady rhythm of Potter's breathing, the rise and fall of his chest against his back.

Potter pressed closer, the curve of his body aligning perfectly with Regulus's. His head dipped slightly, his lips brushing against the back of Regulus's neck in a feather-light kiss.

Regulus couldn't fathom it — fathom how he had found, in Potter of all people, someone who so effortlessly understood him. Someone who knew exactly what to say, what to do. Potter seemed to sense when Regulus needed space, when to push gently, when to pull back. He always noticed what Regulus could handle and what would be too much.

Just like now – it was completely silent; heavy, but not uncomfortable and exactly what Regulus needed; exactly what he needed to untangle all the conflicting things inside him.

Eventually, though, it was Regulus who broke the silence; the words spilling from his lips, unbidden but unstoppable.

"Tell me about your mum."

Potter's body stilled behind him, clearly caught off guard. "What?" he asked, his voice low and puzzled.

Regulus didn't turn to face him. "Tell me about your mum," he repeated, softer this time. "I want to know her. What she's like."

There was a pause, and Regulus felt Potter's confusion in the way his arm tensed slightly around him. But then he relaxed, his grip loosening just enough to be comfortable again.

"She's… she's the best," Potter began, his voice warming as he spoke. "She's kind, but she doesn't take nonsense from anyone. Especially me. She's tough, too."

A faint smile tugged at Regulus's lips despite himself.

"She's older than most mums," Potter continued, his tone turning reflective. "She had me later in life. But it never stopped her from doing things with me."

"What kind of things?"

"All of it – but well, the thing she likes the most is baking."

"Baking?" Regulus echoed, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"Yeah," Potter said, laughing softly. "We've got our House Elf, of course, but Mum loves baking. Cakes, cookies, scones, pies — you name it. She says it's her way of showing love. It's the best thing, honestly. Spending time with her in the kitchen, making way too

much stuff that we can't possibly finish by ourselves…" He trailed off, his voice tinged with love.

Regulus hummed quietly, letting the image settle in his mind. It was so foreign, so incomprehensible to him, the idea of a mother who showed love in such an ordinary, wholesome way. Baking cookies instead of sharpening insults. Creating warmth instead of wielding cold authority.

"Do you join her?" Regulus asked after a moment, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Of course," Potter replied, sounding almost affronted at the idea that he wouldn't. "Though I'm terrible at it. She says it's not about getting it perfect — it's about spending time together. So, even when I mess up, she just laughs and makes me do it again until I get it right."

Regulus didn't respond, but his silence wasn't empty this time. It was thoughtful, tinged with a quiet yearning, sorrow swelling within him.

"She sounds perfect," Regulus whispered.

Potter's voice turned faintly wistful. "Yeah, she is."

A silence stretched between them, heavy with things unspoken. Potter shifted slightly, his arm tightening around Regulus in a way that felt instinctively protective. After a moment, he spoke again, his voice low and tentative.

"She'd love you, you know," he said. "She wouldn't mind, you know… this."

Regulus stiffened at that, his body going rigid at the implication. The idea of anyone knowing about him and Potter felt terrifying – dangerous, surreal. It couldn't be.

He didn't answer, his mind too full of alarm and conflict to form a response.

Potter didn't press. "You'd love her too," he added softly, his tone gentle. "If you got to meet her."

Regulus let out a small sound — something between a hum and a snort. It was meant to be dismissive, but it apparently went past Potter.

So, they just lay there – Potter pulling Regulus just a little closer, resting his forehead lightly against the back of his head.

*****

As December approached, Regulus felt the pressure rising – he had only a couple of weeks left and he was no closer to locating Mathilde's father. His days had been consumed by relentless hours in the library, where he worked his way through every major book and obscure manuscript he could find.

He'd pored over genealogies of French wizarding families, delved into histories of European bloodlines, and even scoured records from wizarding communities as far away as North Africa – but all to no avail. The only discovery he'd made was a brief mention of a prize awarded for the potion he'd invented – the *Elixir of Verdant Recollection,* a complex brew capable of recovering long-lost memories. Some cases claimed that, when paired with advanced spells, it could even retrieve memories wiped with Obliviation. Interesting, but utterly useless for his search.

Time passed quickly with Regulus splitting his efforts between the library, his Beauxbatons homework, Hogwarts O.W.L. preparation, practices on the pitch, and – his favourite – time spent with Potter; he realised that they only had several weeks left in the current arrangement, although he pointedly tried not to think about the time from Christmas on, when there'd be no way to sleep with his arms around Potter or spend as much time with him as he did now.

They spent their stolen hours exploring each other, warm and breathless beneath the sheets or, which had almost become equally enjoyable for Regulus – listening to Potter's stories about his parents. He especially liked it when he talked about his Mum; the stories involving Potter's dad were very funny – it was clear where Potter's own mischievous and curious nature came from – but the stories about his mum were truly precious. He'd recall childhood memories, talk about her funny statements, come up with warm and funny scenarios, and he spoke of her with so much warmth and reverence that it warmed Regulus's heart.

Regulus didn't want to come off as a soppy lunatic, so he tried not to ask too often for more stories, although he could listen to them all day, every day, lying in Potter's bed, listening to the warm and loving stories of Potter, imagining it was his childhood he was talking about. Still, Potter often offered himself to do some 'memory training', as

he'd dubbed it, and Regulus secretly couldn't get enough of it.

On Friday evening, Regulus exited the bathroom in his pyjamas, his hair slightly damp from the shower. He paused in the doorway, secretly hoping Potter might suggest another round of 'memory training' But instead, found Potter was lounging on his bed, engrossed in a book. which wasn't that special, except for the fact that it was clearly a children's book. Its cover was bright and whimsical, with animated illustrations that occasionally spilled out of the pages in vivid bursts of color, acting out scenes before dissolving back into the book again.

"What on earth are you reading?" Regulus asked, arching a brow.

Potter grinned without looking up. "It's *Le Voyage du Petit Papillon* — a classic, apparently. A French children's story about a butterfly exploring the countryside. It's enchanted, see?"

As if on cue, a tiny golden butterfly fluttered up from the pages, flitting around the room before returning to its place in the book.

Regulus couldn't help but smile. "You're reading children's books now?"

"It's Mathilde's – got mixed up with my books, apparently," Potter said defensively, laughing. "Besides, it's brilliant. You should see how the scenes play out."

Curious, Regulus crossed the room and sat beside him.

"Let me see that." He reached for the book, flipping through the pages curiously, until his eyes landed on the first page. There, a detailed crest caught his eye; he recognised it immediately, of course, but hadn't seen it so large and detailed yet – the Legot's family crest.

"It's a nice crest, isn't it?" Potter said, glancing over. "I noticed it earlier. So detailed."

The crest was intricate yet unmistakable: a golden cicada perched atop sprigs of lavender, framed by a radiant sunburst and a silver olive branch. The colors were rich and evocative — violet and gold for the lavender and the cicada, deep blue like the Provençal sky.

The Provençal sky…

Lavender…

The cicada…

His breath hitched.

It had always been right in front of him. The crest, the lavender, the cicadas — it could only mean Provence. The Legot family was from Provence… Sure, it wasn't the revelation he was looking for; it was a large region, after all, but it was *something* – he now at least had *something* to work with…

Naturally, he couldn't show anything to Potter about his sudden revelation, so he closed the book, handing it back with feigned indifference, though his heart pounded in his chest.

Potter tilted his head, studying him for a moment before breaking into a grin.

"C'mon," he said, setting the book aside. "Let me tell you about the time my mum baked a pie so badly, even my dad couldn't pretend to like it."

Regulus laughed, letting Potter pull him down onto the bed, his mind still swirling with the discovery as he settled into the comfort of Potter's voice.

*****

They had talked late into the night — or actually, most of the talking had been done by Potter, his main story spiralling into several other stories, eventually sending Regulus into a deep sleep filled with warm dreams. Still, it had turned late, so he woke groggy and tangled in the sheets, with Potter's arm draped possessively across his chest. He felt so at peace, his body warm against Potter's under the sheets, that the thought of having to get up for Quidditch instantly made him groan in resentment.

Potter stirred beside him.

"I still can't believe your father invented Sleekeazy's Hair Potion , " Regulus muttered, taking in the sight of Potter's disastrous hair, his voice heavy with sleep.

Potter grinned lazily, propping himself up on one elbow. "Yes, but you know, Black, I am untamable."

Regulus laughed as Potter's eyes trailed over the nightstand, taking in

the time at the little clock.

“Shit! Practice is in 20 minutes!” Potter blurted, bolting upright and immediately starting to scramble for his clothes.

Regulus groaned. “It should be illegal to go from relaxed to that energetic so fast.” He reluctantly swung his legs out of bed and began getting dressed – apparently too slow for Potter’s liking, who kept pressing him to move faster.

“Relax, Potter,” Regulus shot. “It’s not the first time we’re late–”

“I know, I know, but we’ve got tons of drills to do and new tactics to go over – so hurry up, Black!”

Regulus sighed. “We won’t even have time for *breakfast*.”

“You’ll survive – you can raid the Kitchens afterwards,” Potter retorted as he darted into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Regulus rolled his eyes and started lacing his boots when his gaze drifted to Potter’s Quidditch bag sitting by the wardrobe – the contents were just as chaotic as Potter’s hair; Quidditch gear, a Quaffle and – Regulus realised with an excited jolt – a small stash of brownies tucked just out of sight.

He laughed in triumph – if Potter was going to drag him out to the pitch on an empty stomach, this would have to do.

Sure, he had no idea how long it had been in Potter’s bag, but it still looked good – although it tasted a bit earthy, its texture was still good and fresh.

He grabbed another for good measure, tucking the remaining crumbs into his mouth just as Potter emerged from the bathroom, looking freshly disheveled.

“You ready?” Potter asked, grabbing his broom and tossing a glance at Regulus.

“Yes,” Regulus said, suppressing a smirk as he grabbed his own broom.

*****

It all started as they crossed the Hogwarts grounds toward the Quidditch locker rooms – and Regulus began to notice something…

off.

The crisp morning air felt sharper than usual, each breath cool and strange in his chest. The world around him seemed brighter somehow, the sunlight almost too golden, while the shadows cast by the trees looked oddly fascinating. He shook his head, trying to shake it off, but a strange warmth bubbled up inside him, making him grin without really knowing why.

Potter jogged ahead, his broom slung over his shoulder, but Regulus found himself lagging behind, distracted by the crunch of his boots on the frost-dusted grass. He let out a sudden laugh, for no real reason, which startled even himself.

“You alright there?” Potter called, pausing to glance back at him, brows furrowed.

Regulus caught up, his own broom bouncing awkwardly in his hand. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving Potter off with an overly wide grin. “Just… feeling a bit lightheaded, that’s all.”

Potter gave him a quick once-over. “It’s the empty stomach,” he said knowingly. “That’s why I’m normally always so insistent on everyone having breakfast before training…”

Regulus hesitated, then smirked. “Not entirely empty, though. I nicked your brownies before we left.”

Potter froze mid-step, his eyes widening in horror. “What?”

“Yeah, they were nice,” Regulus said, nonchalant. He then took in the weird gaze of Potter. “Since when have *you* become all territorial about your food?”

Potter grabbed him by the arm, spinning him around to face him properly. “No, no, you *ate* my brownies?”

Regulus blinked at him, confused. “You’re *slow* today – obviously, that’s what I just said, isn’t it?”

Potter ran a hand through his already messy hair, looking genuinely panicked now. “Shit, Black – those – those aren’t normal brownies.”

Before Regulus could respond, Sirius sauntered into view, his broom over his shoulder and a wary expression on his face. “What’s all the commotion?” he asked, stopping beside them.

Potter turned to Sirius, his face a mix of guilt and amusement. “It seems your little brother ate the… special brownies I brought back for Theo, Bastien, and Mathilde.”

Sirius frowned, his gaze darting to Regulus, who was now swaying slightly on the spot and staring intently at a particularly shiny patch of frost. “So you’re high?” Sirius asked, crossing his arms, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

Regulus turned to his brother, a lazy smile spreading across his face. “Well I’m definitely not *low* ,” he said, grinning at his own stupid joke.

Sirius and Potter exchanged a look, their expressions quickly shifting from mild concern to hilarity.

“Yeah, he’s high,” Sirius said with a snort.

Potter sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You can’t fly like this, Black. You’ll either fall off your broom or think you’re chasing a snitch that doesn’t exist. Just…go watch from the sidelines, okay?”

Regulus shrugged, unbothered. “Sure, Captain.”

He made his way towards the pitch, his path meandering as he stopped to inspect the texture of a tree trunk, the way the sunlight caught on a puddle, and how soft the grass looked – would it feel like silk? It looked like it’d feel like silk…

But as he approached the stands, a sudden longing tugged at his chest. The idea of sitting still, watching other people fly, seemed incredibly dull – the purest waste of time. So, with a decisive turn, he headed back to the castle, his legs carrying him back to the common room. The vibrant emeralds and silvers of the dungeons felt almost *alive* as he walked in.

Now, some time ago, Regulus had come to realise he was a very loving, swooning drunk – liquor apparently turned him all sentimental and he’d see the sweetness in everything, as if the world was dipped in honey and made of spun sugar. Knowing he’d probably even declare his love to a door knob, he wisely steered clear of the poison.

He had never really thought about getting high – drugs were something especially the Mudbloods experienced with, specifically the Hufflepuffs, and he’d never quite understood its appeal. Still, in those fleeting moments he *had* thought about it, he had always wondered

whether the effects would be like alcohol's; whether he'd turn all swooning and loving from smoking some weird plant, too.

Well, it turned out he did not.

He didn't become loving or sentimental – although neither hateful or aggressive. No, Regulus – and all those present – was forced to confront an uncomfortable truth: when he was high, he became *brutally honest.*

The Slytherin common room was, as to be expected on a Saturday morning in December, fully packed. Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery and Severus were gathered in their usual corner, lounging on the armchairs and couches, laughing and playing some games. To Regulus's dismay, they were accompanied by Eira and Celine, amicably sitting next to Barty and Evan whose delight at the girls' presence was so obvious it wouldn't even be missed by Selwyn.

Regulus strolled over and, without a word, flopped down onto the couch opposite them, sinking deep into the cushions, his head tilted back to stare at the ceiling. The firelight flickered in his glazed eyes as he took in the sight of the shadows of the flames on the ceiling – dancing some kind of weird dance, one flame chasing the other in some strange battle…

He was so immersed by the sight that he didn't register the silence that fell over his friends.

Barty was the first to break it, his tone dry. "Hello to you too, Black."

Evan raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be at Quidditch practice?"

The group collectively fixed their gazes to him, suspicion flickering in their expressions. Regulus waved a lazy hand in the air. "Practice is overrated," he said, his voice drawling but unusually loose. He was still completely immersed by the dance on the ceiling. "We're going to win anyway."

Barty blinked. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Regulus turned his head to him, squinting slightly. "Nothing's wrong, except for the tragedy that is your hair. Honestly, Crouch, how is it *that* frizzy and *that* flat at the same time? It's… it's… you think it's… *magic*?"

His friends clearly sensed something was off.

Evan choked back a laugh, exchanging a wide-eyed glance with Barty. “Are you *drunk*?” he asked, amused.

Barty shook his head, smirking. “Nah, if he were drunk, there’d be more… *L-O-V-E.* You know, cooing about how much he *adores* us or some other sap.”

Regulus looked at the fireplace, the ash fluttering onto the floor and forming something that looked like a bird.

“Nope,” Regulus said, popping the “p” as he turned back to them. “I ate some brownies. They were apparently *special* brownies… And I can confirm – they were *very* special.”

There was a beat of silence before the group erupted into laughter as they pieced it together, their voices bouncing off the stone walls of the room.

Mulciber doubled over, slapping his knee. “HA! Black is *high!*”

Regulus only shrugged, completely unbothered by their laughter, and leaned further into the couch, staring dreamily at the flames. “Laugh all you want. See these flames? Fucking *brilliant* they are. The way they dance…”

The group dissolved into more laughter, their voices echoing around the room. Regulus, however, wasn’t really processing their words – everything seemed to come in fragments, like snippets of a dream. The fire was mesmerising, the orange and gold shapes dancing as if they had lives of their own; the warmth of the room felt like a cocoon around him, and the texture of the couch under his fingers was so soft, so *interesting.* The voices of his friends seemed distant yet loud, distorted like they were speaking underwater.

He felt light, like he might float away at any moment, his thoughts drifting in strange directions he couldn’t quite control. The world seemed sharper, every color brighter, every sound layered with an odd, dreamlike resonance.

Suddenly, something — or someone — drew his attention. A group of girls approached, their skirts swishing as they moved. He recognised Melania, Amaryllis… and Isa.

“What’s going on here?” Melania asked, raising a brow as she looked

over the laughing boys.

Barty, still laughing, gestured to Regulus. “Black here’s high as a kite.”

Regulus shrugged lazily, tilting his head to acknowledge the girls who had gathered around them. Melania and Amaryllis stood with their arms hooked together, exchanging amused glances. Isa, however, stood apart from them, her expression serious, brows slightly furrowed as if she were overthinking the entire situation.

Regulus’s gaze drifted over the entire group – the girls that had just joined, the boys lounging on the sofas and chair – until his eyes landed on Eira. Her deep blue eyes caught the flickering firelight, the colour unusually vivid against the dim backdrop of the common room. He stared at her for a long moment, his face unreadable, before finally speaking.

“Your eyes…” he said, his voice soft and contemplative.

Eira blushed faintly, her lips curving into a pleased smile as she glanced at the others. Barty let out a low whistle, clearly expecting something saccharine to follow. Which was understandable – it’d normally be the upbeat to something praising and cheesy.

“…are so incredibly blue,” Regulus continued, his tone almost reverent.

Eira’s blush deepened, and she opened her mouth, clearly ready to thank him for the unexpected compliment — when Regulus abruptly added, without a hint of irony, “They creep me out.”

The room went silent for half a second as everyone processed what he’d just said.

And then the boys erupted into raucous laughter, Mulciber nearly falling off his chair. Eira’s smile froze mid-formation, her expression shifting to one of awkward disbelief. Celine quickly grabbed her arm, hissing something under her breath before the two retreated to Merlin knows where.

Melania and Amaryllis, however, lingered, their curiosity piqued by Regulus’s peculiar behaviour. They settled onto the couch near the boys, exchanging amused glances as if ready to be entertained further.

Regulus, seemingly oblivious to the ripple effect of his comment, turned to Barty, his expression suddenly serious. He gestured loosely

toward Amaryllis. “You know,” he said, his tone earnest, “she’s so much better with you than that Celine tart. Honestly, Crouch, what were you thinking?”

The room broke into fresh laughter, even Melania and Amaryllis joining in despite themselves.

Then Regulus’s gaze landed on Isa. The laughter around him faded into the background as he studied her. His dark eyes narrowed slightly, his focus moving slowly, deliberately, over her face — her golden locks framing her features, the elegant curve of her jawline, the glimmer of her deep brown eyes, and the soft, delicate shape of her hands that felt so *divine* when running through his hair – something he hadn’t felt for such a long time…

Finally, he let out a deep sigh, his voice quiet but – very unfortunately – audible enough for the entire group to hear. “Fucking hell,” he murmured, awe lacing his words. “You’re so beautiful. I just – can’t wrap my head around it. I mean, even the prettiest girls at Beauxbatons — Solène, Élise — they’re nothing compared to you…”

The group fell into chaos. Melania and Amaryllis gasped softly, perched at the edge of their seats with wide eyes, waiting to see where this would go. The boys erupted in laughter, loud and boisterous. Isa, meanwhile, turned a vivid shade of crimson, letting out a laugh — half flattered, half mortified — as she raised a hand to hide her face.

Unfortunately for her – and frankly, himself – Regulus wasn’t quite done yet.

“So *bloody* beautiful… ” he continued, his voice utterly sincere. “Your eyes, your hair… your hands… honestly, it’s ridiculous.” He paused, his brow furrowing as if he’d just stumbled upon a profound realisation. “…but *fuck*, you’re also annoying as hell. You irritate me to the bloody bone, Nott. *Shit*, how you annoy me.”

This sent the group into even louder barks of laughter. Isa groaned, her embarrassment visible, but she couldn’t help the small smile tugging at her lips.

“It’s official,” Barty said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I officially don’t understand you two.”

Isa snorted and reached for Regulus’s arm, tugging him to his feet. “Ah, don’t despair, Crouch,” she said, smirking. “Some things are just … above your head.”

Barty glared at her, irritated.

“Come on, Reg,” Isa said, amused exasperation colouring her tone. “Let’s get you somewhere quieter before you offend everyone else in the room.”

Regulus shrugged and allowed himself to be led away to an empty corner of the common room, his arm draped casually around Isa’s shoulders as they crossed the room.

There, without a second thought, Regulus settled down onto the floor.

Isa raised an eyebrow and pointedly gestured at the sofa a few feet away.

“The floor is magnificent, Nott,” Regulus declared, patting the spot beside him in invitation.

Sighing, Isa gave in, lowering herself onto the floor. They sat shoulder to shoulder, the crowd far enough away to feel comfortably secluded.

“*How* did you end up high again?” Isa asked, her tone dripping with amusement as her eyes ran over Regulus, who, in turn, was now fully engrossed by the green light shining through the window at the far end of the room.

“Accident,” he replied solemnly. “Ate Potter’s special brownies by mistake.”

Isa snorted, patting her lap. Regulus turned toward her, eyes flicking from her face to her lap in dawning comprehension. Before he could question her meaning, she added with a smirk, “C’mon, I know you’ve missed it.”

With slight reluctance, Regulus shifted, laying his head on her lap. Almost instantly, Isa’s fingers wove into his curls, untangling them with practiced ease. A soft hum of contentment escaped him.

“How’ve you been, Reg?” Isa asked gently.

“Good,” he replied earnestly. “Better.”

Eyes closed, he felt himself floating, weightless under her touch and drifting, swaying due to the brownies. “I’ve missed you,” he murmured, voice barely audible. “Oh, I’ve missed you.”

He could *hear* Isa’s smile.

“You’re my best friend, Ies,” Regulus continued, his tone low and drowsy. “My bestest friend.”

Isa snorted. “Bestest?”

“Yeah,” Regulus nodded, his eyes still closed as he rather enjoyed the feeling of twirling while Isa softly scratched his head. “No idea what I’d do without you. But I just…” his voice croaked, although it was barely audible, “I just don’t know how to cope with it.”

He felt Isa stiffen under him, until she relaxed again. He couldn’t blame her – after months of dodging the subject, he had now himself raised the situation that had evolved in Damascus.

“And you’re coping now?” Isa asked softly.

“Yeah,” Regulus answered. “I’m coping now.”

“Good,” Isa breathed gently. “That’s good, Reg.”

“How’ve you been?” Regulus drawled, barely still conscious, the sensation of Isa’s hands practically sending him into a very deep sleep. “How’s my favourite Ravenclaw doing?”

Isa snorted. “I’m … alright, Reg.”

“Alright.”

“I’ve brewed you some more potions,” Isa said, her fingers now scratching a very pleasant spot behind his ear.

“Potions?” he asked between hums.

“Yeah – you know, for you…”

“Oh,” Regulus said as he pieced it together, his mind flipping to the sight of his nightstand drawer bulging with the potions he was no longer taking. “I – I don’t think I need them anymore.”

This seemingly drew Isa’s attention, as she abruptly stopped moving her hand. Regulus opened his eyes and turned his head to face her.

“You’re not taking the potions?” she asked, surprised. “And you’re… sleeping well?”

Regulus shrugged, not really eager to discuss the topic. “Yeah – like I said, I’m coping.”

Isa nodded. “That’s good, Reg,” she said, smiling gently. “I’m glad. I think my dad’s stock of ebonwood sap’s glad too.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow in confusion.

Isa snorted. “With Minchum restricting all these ingredients imports – well, you know my dad can get his hands on anything easily, but it’ll probably turn them to keep closer tabs on their stocks.”

Regulus nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah – ebonwood sap’s not easy to find. Unless you’ve got connections in Japan’s magical rainforests…”

“Exactly.” Isa paused, then added with a grin, “I always wonder how potioneers invent things. Do they just throw stuff together and hope for the best?”

Regulus shrugged. “Not random, I think. Usually, they’ve mastered one potion and brew an offshoot. Or they experiment with a specific ingredient.”

Isa nodded. “Makes sense – a masterpiece is often something personal, regardless of it being an artwork, music or a potion…”

And at that, a realisation suddenly struck Regulus like lightning.

His mind raced, piecing together fragments of thought with startling clarity.

No way.

Could it?

Could it be *that* easy?

Was it *that* obvious?

A masterpiece is often something personal.

Without a word, Regulus sat bolt upright, startling Isa.

“Regulus?” she asked, confused.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, voice urgent. “Library. I’ll … I’ll see you later.”

Before she could respond, he was gone, darting through the common room and heading straight for the library, his mind whirring.

He knew the potion Bagot was famous for; the Elixir of Verdant Recollection. He just needed to know the potion's ingredients, then see where one could find them… or link them to another potion with similar main ingredients and take it from there… That is, *if* there was a connection here, anyway. It was a very, very long shot. *Such* a long shot…

But he felt it – felt that there was something there.

Or it was just the brownies.

*****

It was *not* the brownies, Regulus came to realise less than half an hour later.

Just thirty minutes – one conversation and hardly thirty minutes in the Hogwarts library, and it was done. Finished. Completed.

Regulus stood in the potions aisle of the library, his heart pounding with the thrill of discovery. He rifled through shelves, his fingers trailing over worn spines until they stopped at *Rare Alchemical Creations and Their Mysteries* . He pulled it down, the weight of the thick book reassuring in his hands, and flipped through the fragile pages with quick, deliberate movements. He still felt a bit foggy, the faint haze from the brownies clinging to him, but the sharp, jittery edge was gone.

His pulse quickened as his eyes scanned the recipe, noting the ingredients carefully – unicorn horn, dittany essence, phoenix tear and vermilion truffle. His brows knit together as he considered the list.

The first three ingredients were formidable but feasible – with the right channels, one could find them rather easily. The vermilion truffle, however, stood out.

He turned the page, searching for more detail, and found an elaboration.

"The Vermilion Truffle is among the rarest magical fungi, flourishing only in the enchanted soils of the Luberon Valley in Provençe. Growing beneath the ancient Enchanted Stone Pines, these truffles are shielded by natural wards, making them impervious to casual foraging. Only those with deep knowledge of magical botany can successfully locate and harvest them."

Regulus froze, rereading the passage.

Only in Provençe. The Luberon Valley. Beneath enchanted pines.

The other ingredients had diverse origins; bicorns were common enough, with their horns traded in magical markets across the world. Dittany thrived in regions like Crete and the Mediterranean, its essence easily extracted by skilled potioneers. Phoenix tears were rare, sure, but not bound to a specific region.

But the vermilion truffle was different.

Singular – exclusive.

He sighed and sat down at the table, the revelation washing over him. Sure, he didn't have *proof* and even if it were true, it was hardly an answer; even if the Legot family *did* reside in Provence and in the Luberon Valley, close to enchanted pines – it was hardly an exact location and the family's estate would undoubtedly be cloaked in protective enchantments.

And yet – and he was sure it wasn't the brownies this time around too – he felt he had found it; felt he had found the answer; felt that he had finally, in the last week of his mission, found what he had been looking for.

He let the weight of the moment settle over him, staring off into the distance. He was sure that the haze of the brownies had worn off, leaving him sharper, more clear-headed; it was easier now to streamline his thoughts and he was less quickly distracted by things that were or were not forming strange shapes or performing strange dances.

But then he was met with the sight of something so bizarre, so entirely out of place, that he suddenly very much doubted his soberness.

Because there was nothing that could logically explain the sight of James Potter and Isadora Nott strolling into the library – *together*.

Regulus's jaw metaphorically hit the floor and stayed there until the pair spotted him, Isa looking marginally more displeased than Potter, whose grin was positively insufferable.

"Ah, you were right, after all," Potter said playfully to a disgruntled Isa.

"Yes, Potter," she shot, clearly annoyed, folding her arms and rolling her eyes. "I'm not a complete idiot."

Regulus blinked, struggling to process the surreal image in front of him. “W-what is happening right now?”

“This nutter–” Isa gestured toward Potter with exasperation, “–nearly got himself hexed by half the Slytherin common room.”

“Yes, delightful bunch, your housemates,” Potter added dryly, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement. “Nice and welcoming lot you Slytherins are.”

Regulus stared. “Why were you anywhere near the common room?”

“Because this reckless idiot thought it was wise to *wait for you* outside of it,” Isa said, her tone making it clear just how unimpressed she was. “I had to intervene before he got himself turned into some animal.”

“Hold up, Nott – you call *that* intervening?” Potter interjected, feigning outrage.

“If it weren’t for me, you’d have been unrecognisable by now – don’t act like you did anything remotely helpful – only made matters worse with your stupid comments.”

“Still alive, aren’t I?” Potter quipped.

“Barely,” Isa retorted.

Regulus rubbed his temples. “I still don’t understand *why* you were waiting for me.”

Potter rolled his eyes as if the answer were obvious. “We’ve got to head back to Beauxbatons, don’t we? I didn’t know where you were, so I figured I’d… fetch you.”

Isa scoffed. “Yes, because that’s the rational thing to do, Potter. Wander into Slytherin territory alone. Genius.”

“And then Nott here told me you’d headed off to the library –”

“Which he clearly didn’t believe–”

“Which you didn’t truly believe either, Nott–”

Regulus blinked.

“W- what?”

“Yes,” Potter, “of all the places you could spend being high, you chose the *library*?”

“Yes, I have to agree with him, Reg,” Isa nodded, “there *must* be more thrilling places to go when… you know… intoxicated.”

Regulus blinked again.

“Then again,” Isa continued, “*are* you still high?”

“Yes Black – *are* you?”

Regulus blinked.

“Considering this –” he pointed between Isa and Potter with his finger “–I think I might be.”

Potter laughed.

“I hate it when you two gang up on me,” Regulus shot.

Potter smiled broader than ever, patting Isa patronisingly on her shoulder, a gesture she answered with a look shooting daggers.

Her irritation seemed to only fuel his amusement, as he turned to Regulus. “C’mon, Black, we’ve gotta go – Beaumont will be waiting for us.” He smirked, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “And I’m sure you have more … pleasant ways to spend your Saturday afternoon.”

“Potter,” Regulus shot him warningly as the trio turned on their heels to exit the library.

Potter shot him a sideway smirk, looking very smug.

Silence stretched between them until they reached the Entrance Hall.

“Next time you’re stupid enough to walk into Slytherin territory, you’re on your own, Potter,” Isa said sharply, her voice dripping with exasperation. She crossed her arms briefly before spinning on her heel with a graceful, almost imperious flair. Her steps echoed faintly against the stone floor as she strode toward the stairs leading to the dungeons, her hair swaying slightly behind her.

Regulus and Potter both stared at her walking away.

“Seriously, the girl is *terrifying*,” Potter breathed, disbelief lacing his voice.

“Yeah,” Regulus nodded, glancing at the sight of Isa walking away.

As they flooed back to Beauxbatons and made their way to their dorm, Regulus noticed that Potter was uncharacteristically quiet. Regulus, still sobering up, didn’t mind the silence — it was almost comforting — but he couldn’t help noticing that Potter seemed uncharacteristically pensive. His usual carefree energy was replaced by something more introspective, almost… inwardly troubled.

It didn’t take long for Regulus to find out why.

As they changed into formal robes for dinner, Potter suddenly broke the silence. “Is she still with Davies?”

The random question took Regulus by surprise. He paused in the middle of unbuttoning his Quidditch jersey, arching a brow as he glanced over at Potter, who was fiddling with his shirt but refusing to meet Regulus’s gaze.

“Yeah,” Regulus answered after a beat, tugging on his Beauxbatons robes. “I guess.”

A tense silence followed. Potter looked like he wanted to say something else but was hesitating, his mouth opening slightly before closing again. Regulus narrowed his eyes at him.

“What?” he asked, tilting his head in curiosity.

Potter sighed, clearly debating with himself, then decided to dive in. “So… there’s no history between you two?”

Regulus groaned, rolling his eyes so dramatically it was a wonder they didn’t fall out of his head. “No, Potter. For the millionth time — no.”

“Between you and any of the others then?” Potter pressed. “Greengrass, Ackworth… or Warrington perhaps?”

Regulus snorted, laughing outright at the absurdity of him cosying up with Amaryllis, Melania or Eira. “No, no, and no.”

He did sense that the conversation was going into an unfortunate direction, however, and shifted uncomfortably on his feet while trying to come up with a way to steer the topic away from girls and snogging.

Unfortunately, however, Potter wasn’t one to let go easily.

“Any other girl, then?” he pressed, undeterred. “One of the Hufflepuffs, maybe…”

Regulus stiffened slightly, his fingers faltering as he adjusted his sleeve. He debated how much to say. In essence, he didn’t mind Potter knowing – knowing that he had been first and only. But he was sure that Potter would make a big thing out of it; Regulus could already picture Potter’s dramatic reaction; interpreting it as them being soulmates or something else equally unbearable.

Regulus was too late, though. Potter’s brow furrowed, realising dawning as his eyes widened. “Wait — am I—”

“Don’t,” Regulus warned sharply. “*Don’t* make a big thing out of this.”

Potter, as to be expected, grinned like he’d just won the Quidditch cup. “I’m your *only* one.”

“Oh,” Regulus groaned, shaking his head in exasperation. “I am going to regret this.”

“You won’t,” Potter said with a grin that was far too smug for Regulus’s liking. “It’s just surprising.”

Regulus arched his eyebrow. “So, I reckon *you’ve* snogged half the castle?”

Potter laughed, but then his grin faltered. He gave a soft laugh, shaking his head. “No. Just two girls.” His tone grew quieter. “But… yeah.”

Regulus knew what the silence inclined. They could kiss all the girls in the castle and it wouldn’t compare to what they had right here, right now. Yes, it was wrong – a bloke and a bloke, a Potter and a Black; all wrong in theory – the rules and expectations they defied just by being here together. Yet in practise Regulus knew, deep in the quiet corners of his soul, that no one else would ever find a way in like Potter had. No one else would see him so completely, touch every part of him — his heart, his soul, his body — and make him feel this safe, this whole in all his exposed vulnerability.

Their banter faded into quiet as Potter’s lips found Regulus’s, the kiss slow and deep. Potter’s hands slipped into Regulus’s hair, his fingers threading through the strands in that familiar way, while Regulus’s arms slid around Potter’s waist, pulling him closer. Their bodies pressed together and their breaths mingled as Regulus took in the

familiar scent of Potter, savoured the familiar sensation of his skin as he trailed his fingers over it.

Later, they lay tangled in the sheets, realising they had to get up for dinner, although they were both very reluctant to exchange the safe warmth of the dorm for the cold division that faced them in Beauxbatons's dining room.

Potter rested his head against Regulus's shoulder, his breath warm against Regulus's skin, Potter's hair tickling his neck and upper arm. Regulus sighed at the peace and comfort of the moment.

It was Potter who eventually broke the silence, his voice small.

"I don't want this to end," he murmured. "We'll be gone in less than a week. What are we going to do?"

Regulus swallowed, forced to face the reality that he had been escaping for so long. He wasn't stupid; he knew that time was passing by and that their time at Beauxbatons was drawing to a close. This meant Regulus was off to Grimmauld Place and the Annual Christmas Ball and other unpleasantries for two weeks, and off to Hogwarts and the political reality there afterwards; this marked the last week of relatively unrestrained access to Potter, to his body against Regulus's warm and clothless in the night, the last days of listening to the beauty of Potter's voice; as he told him stories about his parents in the beginning of the night, and later, as he called his name, in the softest, most intimate way imaginable.

Reg.

He knew it was all finite, that, even though he wished to remain here for the rest of time, in this warm, loving bubble, completely ignoring the reality of the world they lived in – but he knew that reality was hurtling toward him, unstoppable, forcing him to confront truths he had spent weeks trying to bury.

There was simply no way – no way that they could continue this. Due to *very* extraordinary circumstances, combined with some *very* foolish decisions, they had ended up here, on a Saturday afternoon, warm and sweaty and naked in each other's arms. He had been able to push any thoughts about the future, about the after, far away, focusing solely on his mission and the now. But in a matter of mere days, he would be forced to think beyond that, and, to realise, once, again, that there simply was no way.

Regulus sighed, his fingers trailing over Potter's arm until they came to a rest on his hand.

"I don't know, James," he whispered. "I don't know."

Chapter 12: Of Breakdowns & Endings

The last week at Beauxbatons was strange mainly for two reasons.

On Sunday, Regulus took advantage of the fact that Potter wanted to hang out with his trio of friends a bit on their last weekend at Beauxbatons, and slipped to Thorne's office to notify him of the latest information regarding Legot's location.

When Regulus knocked and stepped into the office, Thorne's expression flickered with surprise — which wasn't strange, seeing they had an appointment in only three days and had seen each other shortly a couple of days prior to discuss the upcoming edition of *the Pure Quill*.

"Good afternoon, Professor," Regulus greeted, shifting uncomfortably.

Yes — he knew he had *something*, he just felt it; but what if… what if, in the end, it *did* turn out to be nothing? It was almost *too* logical, too good to be true. And yet…

And even if the information turned out to be correct — could they actually do something with it? Was it even useful?

So, he had decided not to get everyone's hopes up and become the running joke if he turned out to be wrong, so he went to Thorne cautiously, set on presenting the knowledge as something that *could* be useful perhaps, maybe; rather than presenting it befitting his true feelings which would entail running to the Dark Lord himself and pressing everyone to move swiftly.

"Mr. Black," Thorne said, raising his eyebrows in surprise but the usual smirk tugging at his lips. "What a pleasant surprise. What brings you to my office?"

Regulus cautiously closed the door behind him.

"Can we talk freely, sir?" He asked as he went to sit across from him at the desk.

This visibly caught Thorne's attention, who sat up straighter and slowly trailed his gaze over Regulus. Regulus nervously fidgeted at his sleeves, not quite meeting the professor's eyes.

Frankly, he knew his nervosity around the professor wasn't necessary;

Thorne was always full of praise when it came to Regulus, was the only grown-up who asked about Regulus's opinions on politics and to whom his answers actually seemed to matter, and had, now at Beauxbatons, even grown to be more than just a Professor; he'd give him advice on plenty of matters – always unasked but never unkind – meant to boost his confidence, and always found an opportunity to underscore Regulus's promising intelligence.

And still, despite all of this, Thorne was just one of these people that made Regulus a bit uncomfortable; having high expectations and at the same time seeming too knowledgeable, as if their eyes pierced through Regulus's thoughts and feelings.

"Yes, we can," Thorne answered, gesturing for Regulus to continue talking. As Regulus settled into the seat, Thorne reached into his desk drawer. He retrieved a cigar and a bottle of Butterbeer, the latter of which he slid across to Regulus. Regulus accepted it out of habit, though, as always, he left it unopened.

"I – I think I have new information," Regulus started, his fingers twitching at the edges of his sleeves and locking eyes with Thorne's piercing gaze.

Thorne leaned forward slightly, his curiosity plain. "New information? Go on."

"I think I know where the Legots reside," Regulus said, his voice firmer than he felt. His words hung in the air, met with silence as Thorne stilled.

"You think," Thorne repeated, his tone flat but expectant. His eyes searched Regulus's face, reading more than he let on. "Explain."

"Well," Regulus started, "their family crest made me realise they are from Provençe, but there is barely any information about Mr. Legot or, you know, this whereabouts."

He hesitated, watching Thorne carefully, but the professor only nodded, silently encouraging him.

"The only thing that I've come across is the potion that Mr. Legot is famous for – the Elixir of Verdant Recollection."

Thorne's eyes narrowed with interest as he rested his elbows on the desk.

“Well, there’s four main ingredients to this Elixir,” Regulus continued. “Dittany, bicorns, phoenix tears… and vermilion truffle.”

Thorne took this in, taking a long draw from his cigar. Smoke curled lazily between them as he nodded. “Go on.”

“I traced the ingredients — where one might find them… and they’re all rather easy to access or at least accessible at multiple places. Except for the vermillion truffle. They grow beneath the ancient enchanted stone pines…”

The room fell silent, the weight of his words sinking in. Thorne’s expression shifted subtly, the pieces clearly falling into place in his mind. “Found in a very specific valley in the mountainous area of Provençe,” Thorne filled in.

“Precisely,” Regulus said.

Thorne sat back slowly, then stood, pacing behind his desk as he considered.

“A rare ingredient tied to a very specific location,” he said quietly, repeating Regulus’s logic aloud. “It’s… logical. Sound.” He stopped, turning to face Regulus fully. “You may well have uncovered something critical, Mr. Black.”

The praise filled Regulus with a mix of pride and apprehension. “What now?” he asked, his voice quieter than before.

Thorne took a long drag from his cigar, exhaling slowly before responding. “There’s a meeting tonight,” he said, almost offhandedly.

Regulus straightened, his heart skipping. Sure, he wanted them to *move* — to get somewhere; but the idea of barging into the meeting that night to provide information that he didn’t even know was useful in the first place — well, it made him positively nauseous. So, Thorne’s next words actually came as a relief.

“But we cannot disrupt the meeting tonight.”

Regulus sighed.

“We will go tomorrow night. Seven sharp,” Thorne continued. “So we won’t disrupt matters tonight.”

Regulus nodded, rising from his seat.

“You’ve done well, Regulus.” Thorne’s voice was a strange mix of warm and contemplative. “I’m impressed.”

Regulus nodded as he turned to exit the room.

*****

So, as agreed, Regulus left for Cissy’s place through the fireplace the next evening, following Thorne. He had slipped away from the dorm with the often used excuse of working on a project for one of his subjects.

Now, as he walked down the long corridor on the first floor of the Black Manor leading to the drawing room, his nerves tightened. He truly hoped the gathering would be small; the idea of having to present his findings to a crowd, only to have them dismissed as useless or leading nowhere, made his stomach churn.

Both to Regulus’s surprise and relief, there was only Lucius and the Dark Lord in the room when he entered.

“Regulus,” the Dark Lord greeted him with a calm, kind tone. Regulus didn’t miss the gleam of anticipation in his eyes. “I take it you have information for me?”

Regulus shifted awkwardly, his heart pounding in his chest and his palms slowly turning sweaty as he grew suddenly hyper-aware of his posture and the weight of the Dark Lord’s stare. “Well... I think I might know the region they reside in,” he began hesitantly. “But I’m not certain. I don’t know if the information will prove useful.”

The Dark Lord’s expression remained neutral, though his eyes gleamed ever more. “Well, I’d say no piece of intelligence is too small to consider.”

Encouraged, Regulus nodded and began explaining his findings. “Well, judging from the Legot’s family crest, they reside in Provençe, and … well, based on Legot’s famous potion, I believe the family resides in the Luberon Valley, close to the enchanted pines – you see, Mr. Legot’s Elixir needs vermilion truffles, which can only be harvested there, beneath these pines…” Regulus was aware that his voice had grown more confident and steady as he talked, but now that his monologue was over, he slightly cowered, realising that his ‘intelligence’ could probably hardly be called that. He hoped that the Dark Lord wouldn’t mind having his precious time wasted like this. “I know that it is a large region…”

To Regulus's utter surprise, the Dark Lord smiled as he held up his hand, gesturing for Regulus to stop talking.

"Oh, no, Regulus," he said kindly, his eyes twinkling with a kind of hunger that Regulus couldn't place, "if they indeed reside in this region, it will be easy enough to break the enchantments and… meet up."

Regulus didn't miss Lucius's broad smile.

"You've done well, Regulus," the Dark Lord nodded. "You should be proud – contributing to the Revolution like this."

The warmth and relief spreading through Regulus at the Dark Lord's words was indescribable; all his nerves, all his doubts vanishing like snow in the sun.

"We will start testing your theory immediately."

And with that, Regulus and Thorne were excused, leaving the drawing room after a kind nod from the Dark Lord and a broad smile from Lucius.

When they arrived at the fireplace at the Entrance Hall, Regulus collided with Cissy, looking very happy to see him. Thorne subtly trailed behind and lit a cigar as he settled lazily into a nearby chair in the hall.

"Reg," Cissy greeted him gently, kissing him on his cheek. She tilted his head as she studied him. "How have you been? How are you holding up – you know… with Uncle Alphard's passing…"

Regulus shot her a gentle smile. "I'm fine, Cissy. I'm good. How about you?"

Cissy nodded. "Yes, I'm good, too. Have you thought about where you'll be staying for Christmas?"

The question took Regulus by surprise – he hadn't thought about this; thought it'd be a given for him to spend the holidays at Grimmauld Place.

"I have a choice?" he asked, frowning.

"Well, of course," Cissy said lightly. "You *are* the custodian of multiple estates now. And with Grimmauld Place having turned into the

revolutionary base in London…"

Regulus tilted his head in suspicion – there *had* to be more to this.

"And you might prefer some peace and quiet… unless you'd rather endure, you know, your mother's… heightened emotions."

Ah. There it was.

Regulus eyed her sceptically. "Did Mother set you up to this?"

Cissy softly brushed a curl out of Regulus's hair as her face broke into a grin. "No – but I know that she has a hard time processing the betrayal of both her son and her brother. And well, I know you can use some quiet; the mission, O.W.L.s…"

Regulus shrugged. "Yeah, I guess you're right…"

Just as Cissy was to retort something, the flames of one of the fireplaces turned a vivid shade of green, marking the entrance of Bellatrix.

She swept into the hall confidently, her predatory gaze locking onto Regulus instantly. Regulus felt his chest tighten and his throat turn dry, but he somehow managed to retain his posture and didn't even flinch.

"Is it true?" Bellatrix demanded, her frantic voice making Regulus's skin crawl. A twisted grin curled her lips. "Has my baby cousin completed his mission? Done what he had to do? *Delivered*?"

Regulus's throat was so dry that it was impossible to answer immediately. Thorne apparently sensed his discomfort, as he smoothly intervened.

"We'll have to see about that, Lestrange," Thorne said casually, exhaling smoke as he leaned back in his chair. "But even if it's not exactly what we want, it's something – and more than any other has been able to provide so far."

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed, clearly displeased by Thorne's intervention. Thorne didn't seem affected by Bellatrix's cold demeanour and instead smirked, his eyes twinkling.

Bellatrix scoffed. "Well, we will see, won't we?"

"We will," Thorne said, rising from his chair and motioning for

Regulus to follow him to the fireplaces. “Let’s go – time to get back to Beauxbatons.”

Regulus, very eager to get away from the same room as Bellatrix, nodded and entered the fireplace with a last nod towards Cissy. He made the mistake of glancing at Bellatrix just as the flames sent him off – his stomach churning violently as he took in the sight of his cousin’s vicious smile and eyes gleaming with challenge.

*****

Back in Thorne’s office, as Regulus turned on his heels to exit the room and head off to the dormitory, Thorne stopped him with some very surprising words.

“Don’t let anyone get to you like that,” he said. Regulus froze in his tracks, looking at Thorne, stunned. “You are very knowledgeable, Regulus — you have lots of potential others can only dream of.”

Regulus didn’t know where to look, so he focused on his feet, feeling an unfamiliar knot in his stomach.

“You’re only as weak as you let them believe you are,” Thorne added, his voice low but emphatic.

The cryptic words lingered in the air, and Regulus glanced up at him, trying to read the deeper meaning behind the professor's gaze.

“T — thank you, professor,” Regulus murmured, his voice barely above a whisper, a strange mix of gratitude and confusion swirling inside him.

When Regulus stepped back into the dormitory, he found Potter lounging on his bed, his posture relaxed, but his eyes distant, clearly lost in thought. Regulus’s stomach fluttered uncomfortably – even after seeing him so often in so many different ways, he still managed to take Regulus’s breath away. He looked almost effortlessly handsome, something which always unsettled him.

Potter glanced up as Regulus entered, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

“How was the project?” he asked, his voice calm, though a subtle tension played behind his words.

“Fine,” Regulus replied stiffly, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, though he could feel his pulse quickening.

“Who was it with again?” Potter asked casually, though the glint in his brown eyes suggested he was more interested than he let on.

“Lucien, Maxime, Solène, Elise,” Regulus lied quickly, deliberately avoiding Potter’s gaze, hoping his voice sounded casual enough to cover his nerves.

Potter’s eyebrow arched. “Funny. I just ran into all four of them in the library... and guess what? They had no idea where you were.”

Regulus’s heart skipped a beat. His palms grew clammy, and a cold sweat formed at the back of his neck. He could feel the lie slipping through his fingers. What was he supposed to say now? His mind scrambled for an explanation.

“Alright, so I went to see Thorne,” he admitted, hoping the half-truth would suffice.

Potter’s frown deepened. “Why?”

“He’s been tutoring me,” Regulus said quickly – it was the closest thing to the truth he could think of; the ‘tutoring’ of him being the writing of *the Pure Quill.*

“For what?” Potter pressed, his curiosity growing.

“Social and political philosophy,” Regulus blurted out, the words coming out faster than he could fully process them. “I think he wants me to become a writer or something...”

He cringed inwardly. Such an *awful* lie; although it wasn’t a complete lie in theory. Still, it was hardly the truth either.

Potter arched an eyebrow, his skepticism evident. “Alright,” he said slowly, though the doubt in his voice made it clear he wasn’t convinced.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably under Potter’s steady gaze, desperate to move the conversation away from the awkwardness.

Clearing his throat, he forced a smile. “So... what did you do?”

*****

Besides the somewhat strange ending of his mission — if it had even ended, anyway — there was another development that was, apart from alarming, rather unexpected and strange.

On the last Wednesday evening before Christmas break — and the end of their time at Beauxbatons — Regulus and Potter were in their dorm, enjoying the last unrestrained private moments they had. Regulus had just taken a shower and casually strolled into the dorm. Potter lay on bed in only his boxers — a result of their last activity which had pushed Regulus to shower in the first place. Potter's hair was more unruly than usual, and with his glasses on the nightstand, he looked more exposed – and thus in Regulus's opinion, more handsome – than ever.

He had come to realise that apart from the mischievous smirk and twinkling eyes, Regulus had a particular soft spot for post-intimacy Potter.

So, he was about to make a comment on Potter's disheveled looks, when a sharp, pointed glare cut him off.

It took Regulus a moment to notice the mirror in Potter's hand, and then he understood.

Potter was talking to Sirius.

Now, this in itself wasn't really alarming, although a tad unusual; Sirius was the subject they never discussed, the topic they pointedly ignored. It was simple, really – Sirius had broken from Regulus and all that he stood for and went out and about to cut off any remaining ties. Being still tied to his brother, through no one less than his best friend, would be unbearable for him. Knowing that Potter might share something with Regulus – love, an intimacy that he obviously didn't share with Sirius – and not with Sirius; well, that knowledge would definitely break him.

And surely Potter knew it – knew how his love for Regulus couldn't coexist with his friendship with Sirius – so the only way to uphold the current situation was to block out the entire existence of Sirius as they were together as much as possible. So, to maintain their fragile balance, they had tacitly agreed to erase Sirius from their shared space, with Potter making an effort to avoid the mirror whenever Regulus was around.

For Regulus it was clear; Regulus had been able to do with Potter what Sirius hadn't been able to do with him; to love him despite his ideology.

Little did he know that he'd turn out to be very wrong about that.

With that in mind, Regulus was *very* surprised to see Potter talking to his brother in their dorm only minutes after he'd been naked all over Regulus, and knowing that, at some point, Regulus would re-enter the dorm barely clothed.

Staying out of the range of the mirror, he carefully crept closer and was startled by Sirius's words.

"Look, Prongs – can you go fetch him for me? I barely know the bloke, but it sounded very serious…"

"Yes, sure, Padfoot," Potter said, his eyes full of concern, sneaking a glance at Regulus from the corner of his eye. "He might be in his common room. Give me… ten minutes, alright?"

Sirius's voice was laced with worry. "Sure — but… hurry up, okay? He sounded really stressed."

Potter nodded and carefully put the mirror away, casting a silencing spell around it.

"What's going on?" Regulus asked, arching an eyebrow in surprise. "Who are you supposed to 'fetch'?"

Potter laughed wryly – which was rather uncharacteristic. "You, actually," he said, nodding toward Regulus.

Regulus's other eyebrow shot up to join the first.

"What?"

"So – apparently, there's something going on with Davies. He desperately wants to talk to you — so much that he cornered Sirius, thinking you two are on… speaking terms or something. Probably figured Sirius was the fastest way to reach you."

Regulus scoffed, but the sound barely left his lips before an alarming realisation hit him like a snowstorm to the face.

If Davies was that desperate to speak to him, it could be because of one reason only — or rather, one person.

"Isa," Regulus sighed. "Something's wrong with Isa."

"I don't know," Potter said, jumping from the bed and hastily collecting his clothes. "Sirius didn't have a clue what it was about — just that Davies looked seriously stressed and nearly hexed him."

Regulus began frantically pulling on his robes, grabbing his wand, and reaching for the mirror, his movements quick and clumsy with urgency.

Potter moved forward to intercept him, stopping him before he could pick up the mirror.

“Not yet, Reg,” Potter said warningly, his use of Regulus’s first name a clear sign of how serious he deemed the situation to be. “Sirius… Sirius thinks you sleep in a dorm far, far away from mine.”

Regulus struggled to suppress a smirk at Potter’s awkwardness in addressing the lie they both maintained for Sirius’s sake.

“Don’t laugh,” Potter said sharply, clearly annoyed.

“I’m not laughing,” Regulus replied, though a faint grin betrayed him. His amusement faded quickly as his thoughts turned back to Isa.

What had happened? What could possibly be bad enough for Davies to reach out to him through Sirius of all people? Why couldn’t Isa herself just owl him — or wait for two more days, when they’d see each other on the Hogwarts Express?

A heavy silence fell between them. For a few tense minutes, neither spoke. Potter sat still, his worry evident, while Regulus’s heart pounded in his chest.

Finally, Potter broke the silence. “Alright,” he breathed. “Let’s go.”

Regulus nodded. Potter handed him the mirror but kept a small distance, as if it would somehow make the surreal situation easier to handle.

Regulus sighed and set his gaze on the mirror, locking eyes with Sirius. His heart skipped a beat as he took in the expression on his brother’s face — a mix of curiosity, concern, and feigned coldness.

“Sirius,” Regulus said, his voice colder than he felt. “What’s going on?”

“Davies is going bonkers here — says he needs to talk to you, to see you—”

“Why?” Regulus interrupted, his tone sharp. “What’s so pressing that it can’t wait for—”

“No idea,” Sirius cut him off. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Through the mirror, Regulus could see Sirius moving around before calling out, “Oi, Davies!”

As if it weren’t strange enough to be speaking to Sirius through Potter’s mirror, Regulus now found himself, of all people, face-to-face with Davies.

“Black,” Davies said, his voice attempting a cool detachment – a futile attempt, as his anxiety was seeping through.

“Davies.”

Davies’s pretense of calm evaporated in an instant; his face contorted with stress as he began speaking rapidly, his words tumbling over one another.

“I don’t know what to do, Black — I’ve been trying to talk sense into her, but she won’t listen — you know how stubborn she is — I don’t know what to do—”

“Stop, Davies!” Regulus cut him off, already pulling on his cloak. His stress was evident in his hurried movements as he left the dormitory. “You’re making no sense. Formulate an actual sentence — what is happening?”

Davies sighed heavily, as if trying to steady himself. “She wants to tell them.”

Regulus froze mid-step, the blood draining from his face.

“She wants to tell her parents.”

“*Fuck* ,” Regulus cursed, the word slipping out with unparalleled sharpness. He strode down the corridor, utterly oblivious to the startled students he passed. His mind raced, panic surging with each step. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck* — has she gone *completely* bonkers?”

“I just can’t get through to her,” Davies pleaded. “She can’t – she *can’t* tell them, *please*, talk to her – you need to come here–”

“What do you think I’m doing as we speak, Davies?” Regulus snapped, irritation cutting through his anxiety.

He shoved the mirror into his coat pocket as he approached Beaumont’s office, only to realise he had no plausible excuse for this

sudden, unannounced trip to Hogwarts.

Shit.

So, Potter's unexpected appearance beside him came as both a burden and a blessing.

Sensing Regulus's struggle, Potter knocked on the door with an air of casual confidence.

"Professor Beaumont," Potter said smoothly when the door opened, "we completely forgot to inform you about our Quidditch training session. We're terribly sorry — it just slipped our minds with everything going on."

Regulus blinked in surprise as Potter held up a pair of Quidditch bags, the bloody picture of sincerity.

Beaumont nodded, his expression softening. "Ah, yes. It's always intense this close to the holidays — and with a match coming up after the break…"

Potter flashed a charming smile. "Exactly, sir. Thank you for understanding. We won't take up more of your time. Have a wonderful evening."

With a polite nod, Beaumont waved them off as they went through the fireplace.

As they walked out of Dumbledore's office, Regulus shot Potter an incredulous look. "Clever, Potter. The bags were a nice touch."

Potter smirked. "I've become rather skilled at crafting quick, plausible excuses to get myself out of trouble."

Regulus laughed. "Sure you have."

Then, as if on cue, both of their smiles faded as the gravity of the situation returned, and they walked in silence through the corridor, their steps echoing ominously in the quiet.

Regulus retrieved the mirror from his pocket, his hands tense around its edges as he asked, "Sirius, where are you?"

"Entrance hall," Sirius replied curtly.

Without another word, Regulus and Potter made their way toward the

entrance hall. The tension in the air was palpable, and Regulus's mind raced, weaving together fragments of what little he knew – had she told them already? Why *now*? What had happened?

As they approached, they spotted Sirius and Davies. Davies was visibly distressed, pacing in agitated strides, while Sirius stood nearby, his expression a mixture of confusion and irritation.

Regulus handed the mirror back to Potter, giving him a quick, meaningful glance before turning his attention to Davies.

"Come on," Regulus said, his voice firm but low. He followed Davies as the older boy silently gestured for him to come along.

They started up the stairs, Regulus focused on Davies's stressed posture. As they ascended, he could faintly hear Potter and Sirius's voices drifting up from the hall below.

"What's this about?" Sirius asked, his tone sharp.

"Give them a moment," Potter replied calmly, though his own anxiety was evident in the strain of his voice.

"A moment for *what?* What is–"

"Padfoot, just — please," Potter interrupted, his voice quieter now, though still audible.

The voices faded as Regulus and Davies moved further away, the tension receding behind them like an echo.

When they reached the third floor, Davies pushed open the door to the Charms classroom without hesitation. Regulus followed, his mind so preoccupied with Isa that he barely registered that Potter had evidently managed to shake off Sirius and now slipped into the room behind them.

Isa stood by one of the desks, her posture rigid. Regulus immediately noticed the letter clutched in her hand.

She turned on her heels as they entered, her gaze darting between the three of them. Letting out a sharp, disbelieving laugh, Isa shook her head. It was clear she had been crying — her brown eyes were now red-rimmed and her normally spotless cheeks were blotchy.

"Isa," Regulus said, his voice detached, cold – in stark contrast with

the concern and turmoil he felt within. “What’s in the letter?”

Isa scoffed, though the gesture was softened by the raspiness of her voice. “Nothing,” she shot, though the tension in her tone betrayed her. “Just a letter to my parents.”

Regulus sighed – although he was completely taken over by the urge to shake her and shout how stupid, how reckless and idiotic she was being, he managed to maintain his composure; although Isa was making it very, *very* hard.

“I’m going to tell them everything.”

“No, you’re not,” Regulus said firmly.

Isa’s eyes narrowed, momentarily startled by the sharpness of his tone.

“I can’t keep doing this, Reg,” she pleaded.

“Yes, you can,” he replied, unyielding.

“I don’t want to love like this, Reg — in the dark, without a future. I *won’t* do it anymore.”

“Yes, you will,” he said, his voice steady and unrelenting.

Isa’s frustration was palpable now, her anger rising against the *very* cold wall of Regulus’s demeanor.

“They’ll accept it eventually,” she said, her voice faltering slightly, as though trying to convince herself as much as him.

“They won’t, Ies,” Regulus replied, his voice tinged with finality. “They will never accept it.”

Isa’s anger flared, her eyes full of fury and something bordering hatred. “Well, we’ll see about that, won’t we?” she shot back, lifting the letter in a defiant gesture.

Before anyone could react, Regulus drew his wand and flicked it, leaving the letter to tear itself apart mid-air and bursting into flames. The ashes drifted to the floor like snow.

Isa’s eyes widened in fury. “I can write a new one, you know,” she snapped.

Regulus didn’t flinch – his face was a mask of icy calm. “Yet you

won't," he said simply.

Her hand trembled at her side as she stared him down. "You can't — you don't get to decide this, Reg. I — I know they'll be okay with it—"

"They won't be," he interrupted sharply. "You're not thinking clearly, Ies. This isn't just about them not being okay with it. There will be grave consequences — *grave* consequences."

Her voice rose into a shout, her anger breaking into hysteria. "YOU DON'T KNOW THAT! THEY'LL HAVE TO ACCEPT IT! YOU DON'T GET A SAY IN THIS!"

"No," Regulus said quietly, evident reluctance now entering his eyes, pushing the coldness away. "I don't get a say in this. But I get a say in other matters."

The room froze.

Everyone stood stunned, Regulus's words sinking into the silence like stones. From the corner of his eye, he saw Potter shift slightly, a flicker of confusion and concern crossing his face. Regulus ignored him, his focus solely on Isa.

"What you're saying is never going to happen," Regulus said, his voice steady but laced with a tension that made it tremble ever so slightly. "He'll kill him, Isa. He'll kill him."

Davies flinched, his face draining of colour. Potter shifted uneasily, glancing between the others as though trying to piece together the meaning of Regulus's words. Isa, however, stood firm, though her head shook fervently, her entire body trembling as though she could will his words away.

"And even if he doesn't kill him," Regulus continued, his voice softening slightly, "even if he spares his life, he'll never — *ever* — let him marry you."

Isa's breathing hitched as fresh tears streamed down her face. It was clear that her defiance began to crumble. Her shoulders slumped, the fight draining from her frame, and she closed her eyes tightly.

Davies instinctively took a step forward, but Regulus shot him a warning glance and raised his hand in a silent command for him to stay put.

“You won’t tell them, Isa,” Regulus said quietly, his words carrying a chilling finality.

Isa looked up at him, her eyes wide, raw with emotion. “Why are you so sure of yourself?” she shot, her voice trembling.

The room was thick with palpable silence.

“Because,” Regulus started, letting out a deep sigh in an attempt to brace himself for the reaction to his following words, “if you’re telling your parents, I won’t — under any circumstance — marry you.”

Davies and Potter exchanged bewildered looks – the confusion was etched plainly across their faces. Regulus could hardly blame them; they *had been* discussing Isa confessing or not confessing her love for Davies to her parents, so the topic of Regulus marrying Isa was a very unexpected one.

Isa, though, understood perfectly.

Her face contorted with hurt, her lips trembling as she stared at him, her eyes filling with more tears.

“You bloody bastard,” she hissed, her voice breaking.

Regulus stepped closer, flinching.

“I’m serious, Ies,” he said, his voice firm. “Perhaps he’ll spare him. Perhaps he’ll let him live. But you know just as well as I do that he’ll never allow you to marry him. And in that case, I won’t marry you.”

The devastation in Isa’s eyes was palpable. Her face crumpled as if she were struggling to breathe, the sobs shaking her frame.

Regulus pressed on mercilessly, his words cutting deeper with every syllable. He had to swallow the lump in his throat to be able to let the words roll over his lips. “Don’t worry, though – there’ll be lines of men willing to marry you. They’ll queue up for you, Ies.”

Isa closed her eyes, tears spilling freely down her cheeks as her breathing grew ragged.

“And you know,” Regulus added, his voice lower now, almost cruel in its quietness, “they’ll be different from me. If I were to marry you, I — I could leave you alone. But those men, Isa? There’s one thing they’ll want from you. One thing they’ll *desperately* want. And you’ll have to

give it to them."

Isa let out a guttural, heart-wrenching sob as her emotions boiled over; her wand flashed in her hand, and she raised it toward him with a trembling arm. Regulus was faster, though, and managed to disarm her with a single, effortless flick of his own wand. He caught her wand midair and pocketed it as Isa let out a cry of frustration.

Then, very unexpectedly, without any warning, Isa stepped closer and slapped him across the face – hard and relentlessly.

The sound cracked through the silence, echoing in the stillness of the room.

Regulus didn't move, didn't even flinch. Potter took a step forward, his concern evident, but Regulus raised his hand to stop him, his gaze never leaving Isa.

Then, another slap.

Potter seemed ready to intervene, but Regulus's hand remained steady in the air, motioning for him to stay put.

And then – then Isa crumpled. Her fists pounded weakly against Regulus's chest, her sobs breaking through her anger. The coldness in Regulus's eyes disappeared as he flinched under the sight of her despair.

Her tears soaked into his robes as she collapsed into him, her cries muffled against his shoulder. Regulus hesitated for only a moment before wrapping his arms around her trembling frame, pulling her close. His hand moved to her golden hair, stroking it gently as she wept.

Potter and Davies stood frozen, their faces etched with uncertainty and helplessness. Regulus glanced at them, his expression communicating a silent request.

Potter caught on immediately. With a nudge, he led Davies out of the room, their footsteps retreating down the corridor.

Regulus stood there, holding Isa as her sobs slowly subsided, her tears soaking his shoulder.

Regulus held her tightly, her body trembling against his as her sobs racked her body. He stroked her hair gently, whispering, "Shh, Ies. I

know. I know it's… it's unfair."

Isa looked up at him, her tear-streaked face twisted with pain. The sight seemed to break something in her, and she cried harder, burying her face back into his chest.

And she cried, cried and cried – completely soaking Regulus's satin, midnight-blue satin robes. Regulus rocked her gently, his movements slow and soothing. "It's going to be alright," he whispered, his voice low and steady. "It's going to be okay."

Although he very well knew it wasn't going to be alright. It wasn't going to be okay.

And he knew exactly how that felt. He understood *exactly* how Isa felt.

Just like she loved Davies, he loved Potter. Like she'd never, ever be allowed to be with him, Regulus would never, ever be allowed to be with Potter. Like they'd kill Davies, they'd kill Potter, too.

Regulus let out a slow, heavy sigh, his thumb brushing against Isa's damp cheek as he held her.

What a fucking, bloody mess they had gotten themselves into.

*****

Although they'd returned to Beauxbatons together and spent most of the next day – barring classes – together, the happenings at Hogwarts didn't come up until later at night. Regulus didn't know whether to be glad or not; he wasn't particularly eager to address the topic, but he also didn't quite fancy the elephant in the room – because that is what it was; the subject of the incompatibility of Isa and Davies, and that of Regulus and Potter, together with the topic of Regulus possibly marrying Isa palpable in the air every second Regulus found himself privately in the room with Potter.

Regulus had no idea what time it was. The winter wind howled outside, rattling against the window panes, a stark contrast with the warm, intimate air in the dorm, where Regulus lay with Potter, skin against skin under the covers, limbs tangled.

"Are you serious?" Potter's voice broke through the stillness, tinged with incredulity. "You really think — her father would kill Davies?"

Ah, there it was. The elephant.

Regulus shifted slightly, propped on his elbow, his face cast half in shadow. “Oh, I don’t just think — I am a hundred percent sure.”

Potter stared at him, clearly appalled. His messy hair stuck up in every direction like it was affronted by the idea, too. “I just can’t believe it — who does that to his own daughter?”

Regulus shrugged, wondering why Potter was so shocked by this; of course Mr. Nott didn’t want his eldest daughter to elope with a halfblood, losing her to him forever.

“And what would he do to her?” Potter asked, his tone very much suggesting that he wasn’t quite sure whether he wanted to know.

Regulus thought about the happenings over Christmas last year and realised that Potter probably took into account every horrible scenario possible.

Regulus sighed and looked away, his gaze catching briefly on the frost creeping along the edges of the window. “Oh, Magnus Nott wouldn’t truly harm his daughter,” he said. “But Davies – Davies he’d off in an instant.”

Potter’s eyes widened, his expression shifting from disbelief to something closer to anger. “C’mon, Reg,” he said sharply. “It’s his own daughter. That’s—”

“It’s his oldest daughter, Potter,” Regulus interrupted, a faint wry smile playing at his lips. “Surely you can understand why he wouldn’t let her marry a modernist? Would your parents be pleased if you showed up with a traditionalist?”

Potter snorted, though his humor felt forced. “No, I don’t think so — but then again, they’re right, aren’t they?”

“And you don’t think Magnus Nott believes he’s right?” Regulus countered, his voice cool but sharp enough to sting.

Potter hesitated, clearly grappling with the thought. “Yeah, I guess.”

They were silent for a while — the reality of the incompatibility of Regulus and Potter heavy in the air, almost as a third person present. They had basically touched upon it, but without explicitly mentioning it.

Would your parents be pleased if you showed up with a traditionalist?

Or –

Would your parents be pleased if you showed up with me?

It was Potter who eventually dared to steer the conversation into dangerous waters — he was a bloody Gryffindor, after all.

“What would happen to us?” His voice was small, raw, and his brown eyes shone with a vulnerability that made Regulus’s chest ache. “If… they found out?”

There was no mistaking who Potter referred to with ‘they’.

Regulus shot him a hollow smile.

“They’d kill you.”

Potter flinched.

Regulus couldn’t blame him; the reality of the danger of what they’d been doing for months was a bloody bitter pill to swallow.

Mother would kill him — if she hadn’t dropped dead on the spot when hearing the news that his youngest son, her last hope, didn’t just fancy *blokes* but also the one bloke that had cost her her favourite son, the Heir of the House of Black, in the first place.

Father would kill Potter instantly, probably with a bored flick of his wand, too — like Uncle Cygnus.

Oh, and what his friends would think… or the Dark Lord… or Lucius, Cissy…

Bellatrix.

Oh , if his cousin knew, she’d leave no inch of Regulus unharmed.

“And they’d kill me, too.”

Potter let out a long breath, shaking his head. “I just don’t get it,” he muttered, running a hand through his disastrous hair in frustration. “We’re all people, all the same, aren’t we? Why does everyone feel the need to focus on people’s differences—”

“Look, James,” Regulus cut in softly. He didn’t miss the raw emotions

flashing across Potter's eyes as he addressed him by his first name — a phenomenon that somehow always made Regulus's stomach flutter. "We are allies here," he continued, his gaze dropping briefly to the tangled sheets they were lying under – naked, huddled up against each other, "but outside – outside we're opponents."

Potter's hand balled into a fist against the mattress. "No," he said fiercely, his voice rising. "We're not that different."

Regulus sighed, a wave of annoyance and sadness washing over him. "We are. I am a traditionalist to the bone—"

"You're not like them," Potter interrupted, his voice sharp and insistent.

Regulus raised an eyebrow, his irritation starting to simmer. "Like who?"

Potter sat up slightly, his movements abrupt, his expression clouded with exasperation. "You don't —you don't want to kill… people… or Muggles—"

A short laugh escaped Regulus before he could stop it. "Is that what they tell you?" he asked, his voice cold. "Is that what my brother has made you believe?"

Potter recoiled slightly, his shoulders stiffening as he pulled away.

Regulus felt the sudden distance like a slap, but he pressed on anyway. "Traditionalism," Regulus continued, "or the revolution — whatever you want to call it — is not about killing people or Muggles. There might be some psychopaths among traditionalists—" Regulus's mind instantly shifted to Bellatrix "—as there might be … lunatics among any group of people. But no, it's not about that, not at all."

Potter scoffed. "Tell me what it's about then, if not about dominating Muggles or Muggleborns—"

"It's not about domination, Potter," Regulus said, growing more irritated by the second. People could be so stupid — so misinformed. Writing something off based solely on hearsay. "It's about keeping worlds separate. The Muggles in their world, the wizards and witches in the magical world."

"Merlin, there are so many more important things in the world…"

“Yes,” Regulus snapped, his frustration flaring, “and none of them would matter if we had no world to live in anymore. We’re dying out, Potter. Can’t you see that?”

“What do you mean?”

Regulus hesitated for only a moment. “Well, like you shouldn’t… breed one animal with another—”

Potter barked out a laugh, the sound harsh and disbelieving. “You didn’t just compare the Muggle and magical world to animals—”

“Well, it’s true—”

“Alright!” Potter shouted, his face flushed with anger now. He pointed between them, his hand trembling slightly. “Then what is this, Reg? If we’re talking about things being wrong — about species that shouldn’t ‘breed’ — what about us? A bloke and a bloke?

Regulus froze. The silence stretched unbearably long, the tension in the air crackling like static. Potter’s breaths came fast and uneven, and Regulus’s heart pounded like a drum.

“Well,” Regulus finally said, his voice small, his voice small and fragile, teetering on the edge of breaking. He looked away, visibly shrinking as the words spilled out, laced with self-loathing. “I’m broken, am I not?” HHe felt the sting behind his eyes and clenched his jaw, fighting desperately not to cry. Not to cry like a girl in an argument. So bloody embarrassing. “I — he broke me, didn’t he?”

Potter’s expression crumbled, his eyes wide with shock and a deeper despair. “You think there’s something wrong—” his voice cracked, barely a whisper. “Something wrong with this? You think you’re… damaged?”

Regulus shut his eyes, willing himself not to cry, but the tears burned hot anyway.

“No, no, Reg,” Potter said urgently, his voice shaking as he closed the gap between them, pulling Regulus into his arms. “There’s nothing wrong with this — this just… happens. Like some people like meat, and others like fish—”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, the faintest flicker of scepticism breaking through the haze of emotion. “Oh, but we *can* compare ourselves to meat and fish?”

Potter let out a short, strained laugh, shaking his head before his expression turned earnest again. “You’re not broken, Reg,” he whispered. “On the contrary — you’re so gifted. And so bloody beautiful.”

Regulus snorted.

“I’m serious,” Potter pressed. “And also – if you’re like this… because you’re broken. What does that make me?”

Regulus looked at him, confusion etched onto his face.

“I … I haven’t been through the things you’ve been,” Potter reasoned. “I had a perfectly healthy and lovely childhood. And still – here I am…”

Regulus swallowed hard as the words sunk in — like a melody he desperately wanted to hear, a breath of air that he needed so badly, as if he’d been without oxygen for way too long.

Could it be?

“Horrible, wrecking things have happened to you, but that doesn’t mean *you* are bad or that *you* are broken—” Potter’s voice broke as he took in the sight of Regulus visibly struggling to hold back his tears. “*No* — never think of yourself that way, Reg. You’re *good, so* good.”

Regulus closed his eyes as Potter put his head on his chest, absent-mindedly twirling his fingers through Potter’s chaotic hair. How he wished Potter was right – he didn’t need to be gifted, beautiful, good – as long as he was normal, that would suffice. Oh, how he wished he could believe Potter’s words.

Chapter 13: Of Christmas & Friends

The start of the Christmas holidays was quiet, uneventful; something which stood in stark contrast with Regulus's inner restlessness. As per Cissy's recommendation, and his own true wishes, he had gone over to Grimmauld Place for dinner following his journey at the Hogwarts Express, but after the awkward and stifling affair, he had eagerly flooed over to Black Manor.

The last two days at Beauxbatons had been weird – full of awkward goodbyes with his newly made friends, who he'd see in January again due to the upcoming match, and full of desperate, aching closeness with Potter. Regulus had barely slept the last evening, instead wanting to spend every second of his last night sharing a bed with Potter in the proper manner – talking and laughing the entire night, interrupted from time to time with raw, breathless moments. He had slept most of the train ride, completely knackered by the lack of sleep.

Now that he was back at the massive estate, which had become to feel more like home over the last years than Grimmauld Place even, it was strange how *silent*, how *empty* everything was.

Apparently Uncle Alphard had given true soul to the house; and with him gone, it felt painfully cold.

This together with the emptiness and coldness he felt when slipping under the covers alone – a realisation he *hated*, *dreaded*, forcing him to realise what a lovesick fool he had become – he'd filled the first days mostly with desperately needed studying for his O.W.L.s and some reading. And he even, in an attempt to bring more soul to the house, found himself behind the piano on multiple occasions, playing some lively tunes or waltzes in memory of his dead Uncle.

On the second evening, he lost himself in the melody of a spirited tune behind the piano in the drawing room. The sound enveloped him – warm and rich – as he began to hum along softly, his voice mingling with the resonant chords. His fingers moved instinctively, gliding over the keys naturally, his mind adrift in the music.

He was so immersed by the sounds that he didn't register the presence behind him.

That is, until the presence spoke.

“Reg,” he heard Isa’s voice, cutting sharply through his reverie.

Completely startled, he jolted, his hands slamming down on the keys in a discordant crash that echoed harshly through the room.

“*Fuck* , Nott,” he cursed, messaging his temples in exasperation. “*Don’t* sneak up on people like that.”

“You’re playing again?” Isa asked, entirely ignoring his irritation and settling herself on the piano bench beside him.

Regulus shrugged, his fingers brushing absently over the keys. “Not really. It’s just – a bit silent. Without him.”

Isa nodded knowingly, her gaze softening. “Well, don’t let me hold you back.” She gestured toward the piano with a faint motion, encouraging him to continue.

Regulus hesitated but eventually resumed playing. At first, the notes were tentative, fragmented. Gradually, though, his hands found their rhythm, the melody growing more vivid as the music wrapped around them.

While running through a lively scale with his right hand, his eyes flicked sideways toward Isa. She looked tired — dark circles hung beneath her absent, hollow eyes, and her face was slightly sunken. Her hair, usually beautiful and immaculate, was swept into a cheerless bun. As his fingers returned to the lower register, he spotted her bag on the floor nearby from the corner of his eyes.

“You’re staying for the night?” he asked, his hands still gliding over the keys.

Isa hesitated, her expression flickering with uncertainty. “If – if you’re alright with that.”

Regulus arched his eyebrows, glancing at her with a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Of course I am. Stay as long as you’d like.”

Isa swallowed visibly, her gaze dropping to the floor. The melody came to a gentle close, leaving a delicate silence in its wake.

“I — I just can’t… be around my father… somehow,” she murmured, her voice faltering.

Isa pointedly avoided his gaze, her lip trembling as her resolve broke

and the tears started to spill silently down her cheeks. She brought a hand to her face in an attempt to hide them – a very futile one, considering the rate by which the tears were falling.

"Hey, hey, c'mon, Ies," Regulus said softly, scooting closer and wrapping an arm around her. She turned into his shoulder, her body shaking with sobs as he held her.

Regulus stroked her hair gently, his lips brushing against her crown as he shushed her. "It's alright."

"I'm so sorry," Isa choked out between sobs. "I shouldn't — I know I shouldn't be like this—"

"No," Regulus interrupted, shaking his head firmly. "It's alright, Ies. Let it out."

He swallowed – he hated to see her this way. It was so uncharacteristic, too; Isa crying over a bloke. She was the one to gleefully hex her friends when they were being all heartbroken or swooning over a bloke, and here she was; crying her eyes out, pouring her heart out crumpled against him over Davies.

Besides this, a part of him, pushed very deep down, also felt guilty – guilty that he'd always so clearly disapproved of Isa and Davies, whereas what he'd eventually turn out to do was *so* much worse.

At least the one she'd given her heart to was from the opposite sex. At least the one she'd given her soul, her body to, had no history with her family.

Oh, how Isa would hate him if she knew.

When her sobs finally quieted, Regulus discreetly called for Whiskerley.

"Could you bring some chocolate milk and éclairs to my bedroom? And Isa's bag, too," he murmured softly.

A few moments later, Regulus guided Isa upstairs to his bedroom. She looked exhausted, her steps slow and reluctant. Without a word, he slipped into the adjacent bathroom, giving her space to change into her pajamas.

When he returned, Isa was curled up on his bed, her knees drawn to her chest. The tray of hot chocolate and éclairs sat between them,

steam curling in the air.

“Here,” he said, handing her a cup.

She took it with a tentative smile, her hands wrapped around the mug as though absorbing its warmth.

“I’ve missed you,” Isa said, her voice soft and her smile gentle. “Missed this.”

Regulus snorted. “What – Barty and Evan not good enough for you, Nott?”

Isa let out a genuine laugh, and Regulus felt a wave of warmth fill his chest. At least she was laughing again – her real, signature laugh.

“Do you believe I’ve barely spent time with them?” she said, rolling her eyes. “They’re a tight-knit group of ‘cool blokes’ now: Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, and Snape. They think they’re all very clever these days, you know. And, naturally, they’ve been stalked by those daft girls…”

“That’d be Celine somewhat and Warrington?” Regulus guessed, arching a brow.

Isa nodded with a grin. “Exactly. Though they don’t seem particularly fond of me. Especially Warrington–”

Isa clearly avoided Regulus’s gaze, her mind – like Regulus’s – flipping back to that time she’d interrupted Regulus and Warrington in the dorm.

Although he felt a ping of discomfort at the memory, he couldn't help but laugh at her lingering awkwardness. “Well, she *did* have grand plans for me — plans you thoroughly cocked up, Nott.”

Isa’s gaze snapped back to him, and her eyes sparkled with humour as she feigned innocence. “Merlin, she must hate me,” she sighed, before breaking into a grin. “Though you should’ve seen the way she was glaring at your Beauxbatons friends. Clearly the Black charm extends beyond British borders. Ridiculous, really.”

Regulus snorted. “You sure you want to go there, Nott? With you having all conversations falling silent and all heads turning the minute you enter a room.”

Isa shot him a sarcastic glare.

“Not *all* heads,” she shot in defence. “*You’ve* proven resistant to my talent to win over hearts, for example.”

Regulus nodded theatrically, while he leaned back, reaching for an éclair with a playful grin. “Yeah. I like my heart exactly where it is, and preferably unbroken.”

Isa grinned, leaning her head against his shoulder as laughter bubbled up between them. They sat like that for hours, talking and laughing, their voices weaving in and out of each other’s stories. Isa updated Regulus on everything that had happened at Hogwarts over the past few months and they laughed until their sides ached, completely forgetting the time and their exhaustion.

Eventually, though, the energy ebbed, and their words came slower, punctuated by long, contented silences. As the night wore on, their tired bodies gave in and somewhere between laughter and quiet, Isa drifted off, her head still resting on Regulus’s shoulder. Not long after, Regulus followed, letting sleep take him, glad that tonight he had been distracted from the sharp coldness that Potter had left in his absence.

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Like his previous two holidays, with the presence of Isa, the holidays were actually quite alright. Yes, he missed Potter – to the extent even that it physically hurt. He was aching, *aching* for his presence; his warm body against his deep in the night, the unrestrained laughter he always seemed to draw from Regulus, the endless animated stories about his childhood – Potter was a tornado and without him, Regulus felt that the world was too silent, too still, too plain.

Sure, Isa’s presence did help; she’d help him with studying the O.W.L. material that Regulus had missed due to Beauxbatons, she’d beg him – with his absolute pitch – to play along with whatever silly melody she wanted to sing, and joined him in ordering the strangest dishes for Whiskerley to prepare. Then at night, they’d reminisce about Whiskerley's poor attempts to conceal her judgement regarding their food choices, and they’d laugh until they fell asleep. The bed in the guest room was unslept as Isa spent every night in Regulus’s bed, either curled up against him or at the other side of the mattress – both offering a warm, comforting presence in the absence of the people they would rather sleep next to; although the situation between

Regulus and Isa was solely a platonic one, of course.

Still, Regulus couldn't totally dodge the outside world – his friends knew that he was spending the holidays at Black Manor without parental supervision,which they saw as an open invitation to drop by and spend several evenings there. Cissy had also visited a few times – ostensibly to check up on him. In typical Cissy fashion, she'd taken it upon herself to ensure that anyone with revolutionary business involving Regulus came to see him in person, so Lucius had already made an appearance early in the holidays, and Thorne had announced he would stop by soon to personally pick up the Christmas edition of *The Pure Quill*.

Neither Regulus nor Isa felt eager to share the fact that they were sleeping side by side at night. Regulus knew his friends would never stop speculating about him and Isa, talking endlessly about what they did — or didn't do — in his bed. He was certain Cissy would make a great deal of it, too. Isa, at the same time, loathed the idea of being the only girl in the company of the likes of Mulciber and Avery, so she had taken to sneaking out of the house whenever visitors arrived, either to see her family or to pop by Amaryllis and Melania.

The night before the Annual Christmas Ball, they found themselves in the drawing room, both in their pyjamas; Regulus wore a simple pair of trousers and a matching button-up, its sleeves loosely rolled up. Isa wore one of her signature nightdresses, a tad cold for the season, the reason why they shared a small blanket over their laps while they sat together at the piano.

Regulus's fingers danced idly over the keys as Isa hummed a melody beside him, her voice soft but insistent.

"You have to play it like this," she urged, humming again, moving her fingers alone with the tones crossing her lips.

Regulus, with an exaggerated frown of concentration, feigned incompetence, his fingers deliberately striking all the wrong notes. "Like this?" he asked, pretending to be confused.

"No," Isa said, rolling her eyes, as she hummed it again, but slower this time.

"Oh, you mean like *this*?" Regulus teased, still thoroughly messing it up. He couldn't suppress the urge to smirk, though, which ultimately gave him away. Isa gave his shoulder a sharp shove.

“You tosser,” she groaned, though she was clearly enjoying herself.

Finally, Regulus let out a soft laugh and, with effortless precision, played the exact tune she’d been trying to teach him. “This the melody you asked for?” he said casually, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Yes, you could’ve spared me the twenty rounds of repeating the tune, Black,” Isa shot him, although her face looked amused.

“True – but it gives me so much joy to know it took you eighteen times to find out I was messing with you.”

Regulus laughed at Isa’s expression as she dropped her head on his shoulder, now laughing too, clearly enjoying the tune that Regulus played again for good measure.

He stopped, though, as he was distracted by the sounds of a soft knock against the doorframe.

Both Regulus and Isa turned to see Professor Thorne, his smirk wider than ever and eyes gleaming mischievously.

Regulus reacted instantly, pulling the blanket up and over Isa’s lap to shield her revealing nightdress. “Professor,” he said quickly, his tone carefully neutral, though the tips of his ears flushed pink.

“Good evening,” Thorne said smoothly, his gaze shifting between them. “Don’t mean to interrupt… this… cosy gettogether.”

The Professor’s tone wouldn’t even have gone past Selwyn. He leaned in the doorway nonchalantly, his smirk growing even wider.

“P– professor,” Isa stammered, her eyes wide.

“Ah, not your ‘Professor’ anymore, am I?” Thorne corrected. “Also – since a week, not *your* Professor anymore, Mr. Black.” He nodded at Regulus.

Isa looked very confused at this exchange, whereas on Regulus’s face, realisation clearly dawned; he had totally forgotten Cissy’s comment that Thorne was to pop by for the *Pure Quill*.

“Let’s go to the library,” Regulus said as he rose from the bench, smoothing the fabric of his pyjamas as if it’d save some face.

Thorne nodded. “Nice to see you again, Ms. Nott.” His eyes twinkled

in amusement. “It seems to be becoming quite the habit — finding you in this drawing room in rather … unconventional ensemble.”

Isa’s cheeks pinkened at the reference to the last time they had met there — Isa barging into a meeting, wearing a similar dress as she was wearing now.

Regulus guided Thorne to the library, where he had stored the latest *Pure Quill* edition in the main desk’s drawer.

He summoned Whiskerley and ordered her to get Thorne a drink, which he delightedly took from her while reading.

Regulus sifted awkwardly in his seat, grabbing a random book from a nearby shelf in an attempt to busy himself while he awaited Thorne’s judgment.

“Impressive, as always,” he remarked eventually, setting his glass down on the desk. “I’ll ensure it’s delivered to the subscribers on time.”

Regulus nodded, rising from his chair a bit uncomfortably, realising they didn’t really have anything else to talk about and wondering whether he’d have to see Thorne out.

Thorne, fortunately, followed his lead, heading toward the library door.

“You’ve been alright, otherwise?” Thorne asked as they walked.

Regulus’s pace slowed, his eyebrows rising in surprise. “Eh — yes, I guess.”

Thorne nodded, his steps steady, but there was a flicker of amusement in his expression. Regulus then Regulus pieced it together.

“Cissy’s asking people to check on me now?”

Thorne smirked, raising his hands in mock surrender. “Yes, she’s persistent, that one.”

Regulus snorted.

And then, as they approached the Entrance Hall, a thought occurred to him — this might be the only private moment he’d have with Thorne for some time.

“Professor?” he ventured tentatively.

Thorne slowed his pace, turning to him with a questioning look. “Yes?”

“Any news on the mission? Did they locate him?”

For a brief moment, something flickered in Thorne’s eyes — something unreadable that sent a ripple of unease through Regulus.

“Yes, they did,” Thorne said carefully, offering no further details. “We’ll discuss it at our meeting next week.”

Regulus nodded, his stomach shortly churning at the thought of next week’s big meeting; the first in s long time he’d attend, probably in the presence of anyone remotely invested in the revolution.

“Well,” Thorne said as they reached the Entrance Hall, his tone shifting back to its usual casualness, “excellent work as always, Mr. Black.”

With a final smirk, he stepped into the emerald flames and vanished.

When Regulus returned to his bedroom, he found Isa curled up on one of the sofas they’d levitated in from another room. She was reading a book, a cup of tea balanced precariously on the armrest. At the sound of the door, she looked up sharply, her gaze piercing and contemplative.

“You never told me Thorne was teaching at Beauxbatons,” Isa said, her tone clearly probing.

Regulus shrugged as he sank into the seat opposite her. “I guess it hasn’t come up.”

Isa raised a sceptical eyebrow. “So you were working for the revolution then,” she said with a nod. “That’s why Thorne met with you and Father in Damascus.”

Regulus groaned at Isa’s sharpness, rubbing his temples. “Can’t talk about it, Ies.”

Isa huffed in annoyance and promptly threw a pillow at his face. “Merlin, you have no idea how infuriating it is to know you could contribute something important but being stuck on the sidelines….”

“You could contribute in due time,” Regulus replied, his voice serious.

“Though… most of us are male.”

Isa gave him a pointed look. “Surely your dear cousin is involved. She wouldn’t pass up the chance to flick her wand at someone.”

Regulus suppressed a shiver at the mention of Bellatrix.

“True.”

Sensing Regulus’s discomfort, Isa wisely shifted the topic, a sly smile curling her lips. “So — the Christmas Edition of the *Pure Quill* all done and ready?”

Regulus rolled his eyes and groaned. “Nothing gets past you, does it, Nott?”

Isa shot him a triumphant look. “Of course not — it’s pretty obvious. Last I checked, Hogwarts isn’t exactly overflowing with political analysts.”

Regulus lay down on the sofa, crossing his arms behind his head as he stared at the ceiling.

“Though,” Isa added with a smirk, “I’ve noticed how you’ve dumbed down your language to suit the intelligence of the greater masses. How very noble of you.”

That earned a laugh from Regulus, who retaliated by throwing the pillow back at her. “Toss off, Nott.”

Isa dissolved into laughter, clutching the pillow to her chest. “Alright, alright,” she said between giggles. “We’d better get to sleep.” Regulus frowned. “Big day tomorrow – the Christmas Ball.”

Regulus groaned loudly.

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The Annual Christmas Ball was positively Regulus’s most dreaded affair of the year. The fact that it was nothing more than a yearly opportunity for the wealthiest and most influential families to mingle, network, show-off and get plastered under the guise of refined festivity, made it nothing short of Regulus’s worst nightmare.

He realised that this year would probably even feel worse; he had been blessed to dodge most of the publicity ever since Cissy’s wedding over the Easter holidays last year. He had been shun away from

reporters at Hogwarts or Beauxbatons and had spent most of the summer holidays in Damascus; far away from prying eyes, flashing cameras and curious reporters. The Christmas Ball, to which always a large number of carefully chosen reporters was invited, would mark Regulus's first time in a public event since a very long time.

So, it was with much dread that he eventually took a shower and started the process of making himself look representative.

Isa had left in the morning to spend the day with her family and get dressed for the Ball — or, as she'd put it, 'to be submitted to the torture of a corset and endless different hairdos by the coiffeur until her mother finally agreed on one'.

Regulus sensed that something was wrong with the Notts — he was positive that in normal circumstances Magnus Nott wouldn't have given her daughter a carte blanche to sleep at Black Manor and come and go as he had now; the last time Isa had fled her parental house to Regulus's had been over the Easter holidays — and well, back then at least Uncle Alphard had been around too, and had Isa's parents felt a strong urge to solidify their daughters friendship with Regulus in the hope that a wedding in the future would be nothing more than a logical conclusion.

That bond had certainly been solidified and there was no parental control whatsoever at Black Manor, so Regulus realised that whatever played among the Notts must be serious. Isa, however, clearly wasn't eager to discuss it and steered any talk in the direction of her parents far away immediately.

Regulus and Isa were clearly expected to attend the Ball together — a stupid thing, for Regulus was still a bit more than a year away from turning of age, so both their parents' desperate attempts to show the entire world that Regulus and Isa were for each other felt very awkward and very premature.

It was a thought that Regulus liked to push to the outer edges of his mind; the expectation of him eventually marrying Isa.

Yes, their friendship was like no other; spending countless days together felt so natural that they barely registered it, they knew each other to a level other best friends could probably dream off — and yet… yet Regulus very much realised that a marriage was supposed to have a romantic component. And the thought of either being forced to get to that level, or the thought of standing his ground and thus

depriving Isa of it — the endless stream of thoughts, the conflicting ideas; it made Regulus nauseous. So, he pushed them far, far away, to the periphery of his mind.

He literally shrugged off the thought of dining with Mother, Father and Isa at the same table as he slipped on his tailored robes in front of the mirror. They were deep black with silver detailing — not very special, Regulus felt, but very elegant and naturally picked by Cissy. He was sure that his cousin had also interfered in Isa's choice of dress, which would undoubtedly match his.

"You're looking handsome."

Speaking of the devil.

"Hi, Cissy."

She stepped forward, fussing with the collar and smoothing the fabric over his shoulders as she smiled at him in the mirror.

"How have you been, Reg?"

Regulus snorted. "I'm fine, Cissy. No need to worry about me."

Cissy nodded with an eye-roll. "Just making sure."

Regulus smiled at her — genuinely, for he really appreciated Cissy's concerns, for all its irritating and excessive nature. Regulus was well aware of the fact that not many in the family or close circle vowed for him, but that Cissy had always, unconditionally done so, as well as her husband once he came into their lives.

"Alright," Cissy broke the silence, giving Regulus's hair a final stroke as she looked him over. Then she glanced up and met Regulus's gaze as a smirk played on her lips. "Isa knows you're to enter together?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Yes — we're both flooing to Grimmauld Place from here and then to yours from there. Very inefficient, frankly."

Cissy shrugged. "Well, yes, but we have certain mores to uphold, don't we? And, well—" her grin grew even wider "— not *that* inefficient as, at least so I've heard, Isadora is staying over most of the time anyway."

Regulus sighed. "Thorne is very much the tattletale, isn't he?"

This earned him a loud laugh from Cissy.

“Well, yes, I *did* ask him to check up on you. So — how’s Isa?”

“You can ask her yourself in… an hour,” Regulus retorted dryly, glancing at the clock.

“You know that’s now what I meant,” Cissy shot. “How are *you* — like you and her.”

“No ‘me and her’, Cissy.”

Cissy sighed. “Well, all in due time, I suppose. Now, I’ve got to hurry and get ready myself — see you in a bit.”

“Sure, Cissy.”

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Like every year, Dreadmoor Keep was the perfect picture of Christmas grandeur. The entrance hall glittered with enchantments; garlands of ivy and holly spiraling around the marble pillars, the mantles of the countless fireplaces adorned with twinkling fairy lights. There were several Christmas trees charmed to rotate slowly, displaying dazzling ornaments in green, silver and gold. Regulus heard the carriages crunching through the snow and flashes of apparition outside as guests arrived at the premise’s gates.

Regulus however, entered the Entrance Hall through the fireplace — a privilege reserved for close relatives only; the majority of the attendees apparated outside the gates or arrived by carriage. And attendees there were plenty; although only people who mattered, of course – like-minded Ministry officials, wealthy businessmen, influential socialites, and all the traditional pureblood families.

Regulus scanned the crowd, spotting the Selwyn twins with their parents, Yaxley speaking low with a Russian woman, Abraxas Malfoy conversing with the Flints. Further along, the Carrows fussed over their children, now fourth-years at Hogwarts, while Melania’s family was exchanging pleasantries with the Greengrasses. Regulus’s gaze snagged, heart skipping briefly, as he noticed Barty and Evan standing closeby, their gazes trailing over the crowd smugly.

He waited for Isa to step out of the fireplace before heading over. She stepped out of the fireplace looking nervous. Sure – she looked breathtaking in a way only she could; unimaginably and effortlessly.

She wore a deep, shimmering emerald gown and her golden hair gleamed with jewelled pins. The many eyes on her the moment she entered the hall didn't go past Regulus, although Isa seemed to pointedly ignore them. Still – he knew her too well to not notice the way in which she kept nervously adjusting her bracelets and the many nervous glances she darted toward Mother.

In normal circumstances Regulus would have laughed, but now he felt partially sorry for her; as if the prospect of having to marry him instead of the bloke she was actually in love with wasn't enough, she also got another glimpse of the mother-in-law she would get in the process.

With his parents distracted — Father immediately deep in conversation with a Ministry official and Mother preoccupied with Aunt Druella — Regulus touched Isa's arm lightly, steering her toward the corner where Barty and Evan stood.

"Ah, Black," Evan drawled as they approached, his smirk wide and unapologetically smug. "Looking sharp. And you, too, Nott."

Before Regulus could respond, Barty cut in with a grin that was far too mischievous. "Sharp indeed. Turning up to the Ball as a couple and still trying to convince the world you're just friends, then?"

Isa arched a single brow, her lips curving into a sly smile. "Yes, Barty. Much like you and Evan, still afraid to admit you're each other's dates for the evening."

Regulus let out an undignified snort, watching Barty's expression twist to annoyance, but unfortunately he was cut short by the chiming of the dinner bell.

They followed the crowd into the dining hall where they were to settle according to the seating arrangement. Floating candles lit the vast space with a golden glow, their flickering flames dodged nervously by overeager House Elves carrying trays of wine and hors d'oeuvres. Snowflakes drifted from the enchanted ceiling, vanishing just before touching skin, while sprigs of mistletoe — placed at seemingly random and inconvenient locations — prompted much awkward laughter.

At their designated table, Regulus dutifully pulled Isa's chair back for her. She sank gracefully into her seat and he couldn't miss the approving gleam in Mother's eyes. He sat beside Isa, already anticipating how awkward this dinner was undoubtedly going to be.

The food, as always, was impeccable — roasted pheasant glazed with elderflower and honey, charmed to stay warm without losing its crisp skin, creamy soups served in delicate bowls of edible bread, charcuterie platters laden with enchanted cheeses that sliced themselves at a touch.

Still, neither the pheasant nor the soups could make up for the crackling, palpable awkwardness around the table, and for a split second, Regulus even wished that Sirius were here. At least his presence would've made the affair predictable and would've averted all attention from Regulus.

"Isadora," Mother said conversationally halfway through the main course, her tone unnaturally pleasant. "What a stunning necklace. A family heirloom, I assume?"

Isa straightened slightly, offering a polite smile. "Yes, from my great-grandmother on my mother's side."

"And your mother's surname?" His mother's voice was light, but the intent behind the question was razor-sharp.

As if she didn't already know every detail of Isa's lineage, likely having traced it back to Merlin himself before approving the artificial match between them.

"Lemoine," Isa replied smoothly, though Regulus caught the faintest flicker of tension in her posture.

"Ah, of course." His mother smiled, though it wasn't particularly kind.

Regulus glanced at Isa, ready to offer her some quiet reassurance, but she seemed to have found her footing. "I thought the necklace matched the earrings quite well," she added lightly, turning to him with a hint of a smile. "The ones you gave me last Christmas, remember?"

Caught off guard as he wasn't expecting to have to actually partake in the conversation, Regulus tried to respond, but inhaled sharply instead — choking on a delicate morsel of stuffed quail. He coughed furiously, doing his best to mask it with a napkin, but his reddening face and watery eyes betrayed him.

Isa pressed her lips tightly together, clearly fighting the urge to laugh but her eyes sparkled with amusement. Still, she remained impressively composed.

Regulus shot her a sidelong glare as his coughing fit subsided, his voice low and hoarse when he leaned closer. “Expect the following jewellery you receive from me to be cursed, Nott.”

Isa clapped a hand over her mouth in an attempt to stifle a laugh that still managed to escape as a very unladylike snort. Her shoulders shook with the effort to suppress it, but when Regulus’s smirk widened in triumphant satisfaction, she lost the battle and her laughter bubbled out.

Regulus pointedly didn’t look Mother’s way, afraid that he’d burst out into laughter as well.

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The rest of the evening was uncharacteristically uneventful – the only notable things – either for better or worse – being the rate in which Barty got himself plastered and the speed with which Regulus got himself out of the room as soon as he saw Dolohov and Lestrange enter.

However, as Mulciber and Avery were present too, it didn’t take much for the old, unfortunate balance of power from Hogwarts to be restored; Mulciber and Avery practically going where Dolohov and Lestrange went, and Barty and Evan in turn following Mulciber and Avery. It was a good thing that Lucius and Yaxley – who were genuinely fond of Regulus – often joined as well and put the blokes in their rightful place.

For the most part, Regulus remained against the wall, arms crossed, observing the chaos of the ballroom. It wasn’t the worst way to spend the evening; watching others make fools of themselves on the dance floor was mildly entertaining, and his position ensured he stayed out of his mother’s critical line of sight. Mother wouldn’t dare wander too close to the dance floor, which was teeming with displays of ungainly waltzes and awkward flirtations. With that in mind, he’d even resigned himself to the inevitable presence of Dolohov and Lestrange.

Not far ahead, Barty was at the edge of the dance floor, attempting what could only *very* generously be called dancing. His arms flailed in exaggerated movements, and his steps were staggered and erratic, drawing attention from both amused and slightly disturbed onlookers. Dolohov was, of course, encouraging him, clapping loudly and goading him on.

“Barty’s not going to maintain a shred of dignity tonight, is he?”

Regulus muttered to Evan, who stood against the wall beside him.

Evan exhaled through his nose, a sound halfway between a sigh and a laugh. “No, probably not.”

“What’s going on with him?”

Evan hesitated, his expression shifting to something more serious. “He’s having a rough time at home.”

Regulus frowned. “What happened?”

“The inevitable, I guess,” Evan said. “You know – telling his father what he thinks of him; lousy excuse for a husband to Mrs. Crouch, thinking of his career and reputation only and whatnot.”

Regulus’s eyebrows rose slightly. “That’s… bold.”

“Bound to happen at some point,” Evan replied with a shrug. “Anyway, he’s staying at ours for now. His mum’s gone to her sister’s in Germany, and well, his dad…”

Regulus nodded knowingly – his father burying himself in work, probably relieved Barty wasn’t around to make things harder.

Their conversation was interrupted by Barty himself, returning from the dance floor with an unsteady swagger. He slurred something unintelligible and flung his arm out in a wide, exaggerated gesture, spilling wine onto Avery’s pristine sleeve.

“Oi!” Avery yelped, stepping back and furiously dabbing at the stain with a napkin. “You absolute menace.”

Mulciber let out a loud snicker, clapping Avery on the back. “Maybe don’t wear robes that cost more than my broomstick if you’re going to hang around Barty.”

“Maybe Barty shouldn’t be allowed to access alcohol any longer,” Regulus said firmly.

Before the conversation could devolve further, Dolohov and Lestrange sauntered over, their predatory gazes sweeping across the dance floor. The two exchanged comments too low for anyone but those closest to hear, their tones dripping with crude amusement.

“Look at that one,” Lestrange murmured, nodding toward a girl in pale blue robes twirling with her partner. “Bet she’d look even better

with less lace and more—"

"Rabastan," Dolohov drawled, cutting him off with a smirk. "Subtlety isn't your strong suit, is it?"

"Why bother with subtlety?" Lestrange retorted, unabashed. His eyes slid to a petite brunette spinning with her partner, her curls bouncing as she laughed. "That one, for example, is practically asking for it, swishing around like that."

Lestrange's grin widened, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur. "Bet I could have her in the gardens before the next song ends. Girls like her don't say no to a name like mine."

Mulciber let out a bark of laughter, and Avery smirked, clearly impressed.

It didn't go past Regulus that Evan didn't quite know whether to laugh or not.

"Go for it," Dolohov encouraged. "Unless you're worried she'll scream loud enough to attract attention."

Barty, catching onto their tone, laughed raucously, though his glazed eyes suggested he only half understood the conversation.

Regulus's stomach twisted in distaste.

"Ah, and what about that one?" Dolohov continued, his gaze now fixed on Melania, who stood near the edge of the dance floor.

Regulus's gaze flicked to Evan, whose jaw had tightened, his expression growing cold as he followed Dolohov's line of sight.

"She's a pretty thing," Dolohov remarked, his tone turning calculating. "Reckon she'd warm up to a bit of attention."

Evan's knuckles whitened, his fists clenching at his sides. Regulus, sensing the danger, stepped closer to his friend, but before he could intervene, his attention was drawn to Isa entering the room.

Her mother followed close behind, her face tight with disapproval as she grabbed Isa's arm. Isa yanked herself free, her movements sharp and angry. The interaction was brief, but it was enough to spike Regulus's interest.

"Looks like your fiancée's had a bit of a row," Dolohov noted, his tone

laden with mockery.

Lestrange smirked. “Better be careful, Antonin. Black might hex you for hitting on her.”

Both men turned to Regulus, their laughter loud and derisive, clearly trying to provoke a reaction.

Barty, still laughing, leaned heavily against Mulciber. “Oh, come on! They’re still pretending they’re not a couple. It’s adorable.”

Lestrange’s grin widened. “Adorable, is it? Funny, I heard she’s spending most nights at Black Manor – bet there’s not much pretending going on in his bed, do you?”

Regulus, who might usually have snapped at such comments, was too preoccupied by Isa’s public argument with her mother to react. His gaze followed her as she crossed the room, her shoulders tense.

It didn’t take long for a man to corner her on the dance floor. Regulus’s frown deepened as he watched her stiffen, her body language screaming discomfort.

Ignoring the whistles and jeers from his companions, he pushed off the wall and strode toward her.

“Well, there he goes,” Dolohov called after him, his voice laced with mockery.

“Give her a kiss from us!” Lestrange added with a leer.

Regulus ignored them, his focus entirely on Isa and the man standing far too close to her.

“Ah, there you are, darling,” he said smoothly, his voice calm but firm as he placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. The man turned, thrown off guard by Regulus’s sudden appearance — and by the subtle but unmistakable claim in his tone.

Isa turned to him, her eyebrows arched. “Darling?”

Regulus didn’t flinch and instead extended his hand. “Care to dance?”

She hesitated for a moment, but then her confused gaze made way for twinkling eyes and a badly suppressed smirk. She slipped her hand into his.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, though her tone was laced with sarcasm.

Regulus smirked, his voice equally dry. “Anything for you, darling.”

The orchestra shifted to a slower waltz and it wasn’t lost on him how many eyes followed his every move, nor how many whispers trailed behind them. Isa, however, seemed determined to ignore it, her chin held high as she pressed him to move in rhythm.

“Isa,” Regulus murmured under his breath, glancing at her. “We don’t have to—”

“Dance with me, Reg,” she said, her voice low but sharp, cutting through his reluctance. “We’re already here.”

Reluctantly, he conceded, his steps growing less rigid as they glided across the floor. The waltz melted into a softer, slower melody, and Isa’s hands shifted, one settling lightly on his shoulder, the other slipping down to hold his hand. Her closeness caught him off guard – it was intimate in a way that Regulus hadn’t felt with her before. Still, when she leaned in and rested her head lightly against his chest, he didn’t pull away.

As the music drifted around them, the world seemed to blur at the edges. The murmurs and stares from the room faded to the back, insignificant in comparison to Isa in his arms. He glanced down at her, his gaze catching on her tired, stormy eyes, half-lidded and distant.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked softly, his voice low enough for her ears alone.

Isa didn’t lift her head, her tone too casual as she deflected, “About what?”

“Don’t play dumb, Isa,” Regulus replied, his voice steady but tinged with a quiet insistence. “You’ve been avoiding your parents the entire holiday, and now this…” His words softened further. “I’m not an idiot.”

She sighed, her body tensing briefly before relaxing against him again. “I’m just—” Her voice wavered, and she paused, her fingers curling more tightly on his shoulder. “I’m fed up, Reg. Of the whole stupid *trophy girl* thing. Of being paraded around like something to be admired but never actually… considered.”

Regulus didn't interrupt, his gaze unwavering as he studied her expression, waiting for her to go on.

Isa shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. "And the worst part is… my mother knows exactly what it's like. She's lived it. And still, she pushes me into the same cycle. The same useless, stifling life."

Regulus tilted his head slightly, his voice calm and even. "And?"

Isa froze, her breath hitching, then looked down. Her lips trembled as she swallowed hard, cracking at last. "And I miss Nathan," she admitted, her voice breaking on his name.

Regulus exhaled quietly, the tightness in his chest spreading to an ache at the sight of her vulnerability.

"I know," he said softly, his tone gentler now. His hand, which had been resting stiffly at her waist, shifted, fingers brushing lightly along her side. His touch was deliberate but tender, and Isa's eyes fluttered closed for a moment, her shoulders sagging slightly against him as she leaned in the touch.

His mind flickered to Potter, the ache he had spent so long trying to bury clawing its way to the surface once more. How he missed him — Potter's boundless laughter, his careless smirk, the twinkle in his eyes. His touch, his mouth, the way he made Regulus forget everything else…

Isa sniffed, her head still resting against his chest. "I know you don't get it," she muttered apologetically, her voice muffled.

Regulus let out a faint huff, something halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "I do," he whispered, his words firm yet quiet, almost a confession.

The music slowed further, and without hesitation, Regulus pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her protectively. His cheek brushed against the top of her head, catching the faint scent of something floral —lavender, perhaps, mixed with vanilla.

For a moment, the world around them disappeared entirely. It didn't matter who was watching, or what anyone might say. Isa clung to him, her breathing evening out as they swayed gently in place, neither of them moving to step apart.

“I know,” Regulus repeated, his voice steady yet soft, a quiet reassurance shared just between them. “I know.”

Chapter 14: Of Snow & Surprises

Chapter Notes

> A belated Christmas present for those celebrating - this chapter's a bit longer and one of my favs.

Regulus didn't expect the holidays to become more eventful after Christmas. The worst events that could have yielded anything noteworthy – the Annual Ball and the stifling dinners with his close family – were over, so he was quite looking forward to the calm remainder of the holidays.

He would soon be proven to be wrong, of course.

The day after Christmas, he was sprawled on the velvet sofa in the drawing room, one leg slung over the armrest, his attention consumed by the book Isa had gifted him for the occasion — *Veil of the Mind: Mastering Occlumency for Soul and Memory Restoration or Reformation*. It was an astonishingly interesting book and basically dealt with the topics they had researched over the holidays; soul-altering happenings and their intricate effects on mind shielding and, ultimately, the way in which to restore these. Inevitably, it also covered concepts such as trauma, how it disrupted the nervous system and memory formation, and how to restore it. Regulus was positive that it was mostly this section of the book that had pushed Isa to give it in the first place; though it was something neither of them would acknowledge.

Across from him, Isa was sprawled on the opposite sofa, equally absorbed in her own book — *A Chronicle of Courage: Pioneering Witches Across Magical History*. He had chosen it carefully; an ode to powerful magical women who had shaped the world in defiance of tradition and expectation. Isa had clearly been hooked from the very first page, hardly saying a word as she flipped through chapters with rapt focus.

The quiet stretched between them – comfortable and companionable, only broken by the occasional rustle of a turned page or Isa shifting beneath the thick blanket she'd wrapped herself in.

Regulus had just started on the third chapter of his book when an odd, rhythmic ticking broke the silence.

He looked up, brow furrowing, and Isa glanced at him over the edge of her book. "What is that?" she muttered.

“Don’t know,” Regulus replied, already rising from his seat. The sound grew louder as he approached the window, and realisation struck as he caught sight of an owl tapping insistently against the glass.

He opened the window to let the owl in, greeted by a sharp gust of cold air in the process. The sudden chill sent Isa retreating further into her blanket, pulling it over her shoulders with a dramatic groan.

“Shut the window, Reg — it’s too bloody cold.”

Her complaints barely registered as Regulus untied the letter from the owl’s paw — he didn’t recognise the owl, yet he recognised the handwriting immediately.

Potter.

The note was short, direct, playful.

Home alone tomorrow, early morning. There’s Mum’s cookies and something resembling a quidditch pitch. If you’re brave enough, pop by. If not… well, then you’re a coward.
- J.

The emotions hit him in a chaotic wave.

The first, unguarded emotion that shot through him was excitement. A pure thrill at seeing his messy scrawl – having something tangible, something testifying to what they had and who they’d become. Something so stupid and small as a few scribbled lines – yet it was the closest, realest thing to Potter he’d had since they’d left Beauxbatons.

Then, of course, the thrill at the thought of Potter thinking of him — Regulus being on his mind, strongly enough even to go to the lengths of inviting him over.

Did Potter miss him as much as Regulus missed him?

Did Potter miss the feeling of his hair tangled in Regulus’s curls as much as Regulus missed his hands in Potter’s chaos of hair? Did he miss Regulus’s sarcastic comments as much as Regulus missed Potter’s jokes? Did he miss his scent? His voice?

Was Regulus perhaps, too, the last thing Potter thought of before drifting off to sleep? Did he, too, occupy his dreams as vividly, as explicitly, as Potter did his own? Was Potter waking up the way Regulus so often did – hard and aching – terrified he might whisper

his name in his sleep?

The thought that he claimed even a fraction of Potter's brain and heart sent a warmth through Regulus's body, sharp and consuming.

Still — there was fear, too.

Fear that people found out. Mother. Isa. Cissy. Bellatrix. Sirius. The Dark Lord.

Fear that the note might be a joke – sure, it was very unlikely, but still; it was *bold,* the thought of Regulus Black, stepping foot inside *Potter Manor*.

The biggest fear, though, was the thought there was no turning back. His heart had been conquered. His soul bared. Perhaps they had reached — no had gone *beyond* — the point of no return.

And where did that leave him now?

He was snapped back to reality by Isa.

"Who's it from?" she asked, watching him now, scepticism clear on her face and her gaze flicking pointedly to the scrap of parchment. Regulus quickly rolled it back up, pocketing it quickly without, he hoped, raising too much suspicion.

"It's from Maxim," he lied smoothly, avoiding her eyes. "You know— Beauxbatons."

Isa raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced, but said nothing.

"The owl looks familiar," she mused.

His stomach turned. She'd seen the owl before.

Potter and Isa had exchanged letters over Christmas last year — meaning she *could* reognise the owl and piece things together.

Shit.

Eager to have Potter's owl – which he now remembered was called *Elagabalus* , a realisation which made him groan – out of Isa's sight as soon as possible, he opened the window and tried to nudge him to leave. Unfortunately though, Elagabalus decided to stay determinedly put, making Regulus realise that he was probably ordered to annoy Regulus to the bones until he scribbled something back.

Typical Potter.

He sighed and retrieved parchment and a quill from the main desk's drawer.

Without thinking – without acknowledging that he didn't even *know* what to answer, what to write back, his hand was already doing the job, moving of its own accord.

See you at 11. Coming for your Mum's cookies only.
- R.

*****

The next morning came with two challenges that greatly fuelled his already considerable anxiety.

The first was the presence of Isa. He had to justify his absence from Black Manor; had to come up with a feasible excuse that she couldn't possibly verify. Pretending to visit any of his friends was thus out of the question, and pretending to go somewhere like Muggle Manchester would probably prompt her to want to come along.

Eventually, when Isa'd asked about his plans that day and had apparently not missed the conflict plainly written on Regulus's face, she had herself provided the perfect excuse by asking whether he had plans related to his mission.

"Yes," Regulus said, hoping his relieved tone didn't raise any suspicion. "So — I can't talk about it and have no idea what time I get back."

He truly hoped that the guilt in his eyes wasn't caught by Isa's sharp gaze. How she'd hate him – *loathe* him, if she knew; knew he'd been lying to her for months. Hate him if she knew who he really was. Who he loved.

He swallowed as he stood in front of his wardrobe, the second reason for his anxiety slapping him in the face.

What the *hell* was he supposed to wear?

It wasn't really about vanity; Regulus wasn't vain, not in essence. He didn't really bother about his hair or his appearance, but he was raised to look impeccable and he was always surrounded by people who *did* care about his appearance. He could hardly look like one of

these Muggle musicians that Sirius had always so clearly been desperate to imitate without sending Mother off the St. Mungo's.

No – it wasn't really a question of vanity, although, deep down, something he had a *very* hard time acknowledging, he did want to look good. To look handsome.

Still, it was more a matter of practicality. He almost by definition wore formal robes outside the house, but he had an inkling, a sense that he'd feel too out of place, too stiff in robes in Potter Manor. Sure, he'd solely seen the Entrance Hall, so he didn't really *know* that much about Potter's house, but well, the bloody cosiness of that particular space and the stories from Potter about his parents did provide Regulus with a rather solid picture of what to expect.

And as if it wasn't enough a torture already for him to debate what to wear to Potter Manor as if he'd turned into some kind of swooning girl preparing for a date, Isa also managed to barge into the bedroom when he had different sets of clothes spread out on the bed –

and thus looking *very* much like a teenage girl unsure what to wear for her date.

Fuck.

Isa stepped inside looking quite uncomfortable – Regulus wasn't sure whether it stemmed from the fact he wasn't wearing anything but his formal trousers or because of the sheer absurdity of him visibly unsure what to wear. Given that they'd spent most of the holidays together, sharing a bed even, Regulus realised it was probably mostly the latter; she'd seen him in more compromising states than this and it wasn't as if he was naked.

"There's no dress code?" Isa asked, her sceptical gaze flicking between him and the mess of clothes on the bed.

Regulus scratched the back of his neck, awkwardly avoiding her eyes. "Er — no."

Oh, how she'd hate him if she knew where he was actually going.

"I'm just…" he hesitated, fumbling for the right words, "debating what makes me… blend in the most."

He could practically see her mind racing through all the scenarios she could make from this information; probably considering what sort of

mission might require Muggle clothes over formal robes — or vice versa.

Regulus sighed and eyed the clock from the corner of his eyes, realising that it was almost eleven.

No time to overthink.

With a sharp exhale, he snatched a pair of comfortable trousers, a blouse and a blue turtleneck from the bed. Potter was always wearing a turtleneck – making him look infuriatingly handsome, so it'd do.

*****

Regulus flooed to the Entrance Hall of Potter Manor from the library. He stepped out of the green flames and brushed off his trousers, unable to completely hide his trembling hands in the process. He was so bloody nervous. His heart hammered against his ribs, so loud that he feared it'd echo in the quiet of the room.

Regulus blinked as his surroundings came into focus. He had been here once before and he violently tried to push the image of Sirius almost bleeding to death at the very spot he was currently standing to the edges of his mind. He recognised the beige carpet and the red carpet on the grand stairs leading to the upper floors; now, however, the floating sconces gave the space a warm, cosy vibe. Regulus awkwardly looked away from the framed photos in the hall – none of them acknowledged his arrival. The portraits had been enchanted not to witness their surroundings, so they couldn't spy on them. Regulus was familiar with the magic – which was quite advanced – though he'd never attempted it himself.

Clever.

Regulus's breath hitched when he saw Potter.

He was leaning casually against the wall, one leg crossed over the other, arms folded across his chest. He straightened as Regulus appeared, a smirk tugging at his lips. Regulus's gaze faltered for half a second, taking in the sight of him. He was wearing formal robes – a deep bordeaux that clung to his broad shoulders and made him look very handsome. Of course his hair was messy as ever, the sight of which made Regulus's throat inexplicably dry. He tried to swallow, failed, and forced himself to look Potter in the eye.

"Potter," Regulus said, his voice a touch raspier than intended. "You

wear formal attire in your own bloody house?"

Potter raised an eyebrow, pushing off the wall and striding closer. "No, I don't," he replied a bit awkwardly, his hazel eyes flicking pointedly to Regulus's outfit. "You wear Muggle clothes outside your home?"

Regulus's lips twitched. "No, I don't," he countered, tugging at the hem of his turtleneck. "I wanted to blend in."

Potter scratched the back of his head, his smirk softening into something sheepish. "Yeah. I figured you'd wear formal robes." He gestured to his own outfit with a shrug. "Guess I wanted to blend in, too."

They stared at each other, the silence stretching, gaze locked. Regulus's lips pressed together, but Potter's crooked grin grew wider by the second.

And then they broke.

They both burst into laughter, the sound reverberating through the warm space.

****

It was strange, *surreal* to be in Potter's presence, to be in Potter's house – the place where Sirius had stayed ever since his departure from the family, the place where Potter's parents, at the heart of modernism, lived. The place that had made Potter who he was; where the bloke had been raised who Regulus, quite frankly, would very much like to shove against the wall and snog senseless.

Not that he did – no, Regulus's every nerve screamed to close the distance between them, but the air was laced with tension; not particularly uncomfortable, but explorative, quite hesitant. They clearly had to find their footing in this new dynamic.

Potter Manor was exactly how Regulus had imagined it; large, sprawling, but undeniably warm. The dominant colours were deep wood, rich golds, and warm reds, giving the whole place an inviting, lived-in feeling. Rugs lined the floors, softening the edges of what might have otherwise felt intimidatingly grand. The air smelled of the cookies Potter had promised him and Christmas ornaments adorned every room they passed — garlands of holly, enchanted, twinkling lights and a massive wreath hanging above the doorway to the dining

room.

Potter led him to the living room, which was equally cozy. A fire crackled in the hearth, casting shadows on the walls hidden behind books and trumpery. There was a large, plush sofa that looked as though it had been thoroughly lived in, its cushions slightly uneven. Regulus could barely suppress his smirk at the thought of Walburga Black settling on a sofa like this.

Apart from the absurd idea of her setting foot inside Potter Manor, of course.

Still, despite the beautiful tapestries and the incredible amount of books on the shelves across the walls, it was mostly the gleaming black grand piano in one corner of the room that caught Regulus's attention.

Potter handed him a bottle of Butterbeer and a cookie that was still slightly warm, its edges golden. Regulus took a bite, his eyebrows lifting in surprise at the rich, buttery flavor. This was probably the best cookie he'd eaten – *ever*.

"This is… incredible," he said, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

Potter grinned. "Ah, then you're definitely eating one of Mum's. Mine are… less divine."

Regulus's gaze flicked back to the piano as he sipped his Butterbeer, its warmth spreading through his chest.

"Do you play?" Potter's voice pulled his attention back, and he found Potter leaning casually against the back of the sofa, watching him.

Regulus snorted softly as his mind flipped back to the endless, tiresome piano lessons he'd been subjected to with Sirius. Playing the piano was practically a family mandate.

"Yeah," Regulus shrugged eventually, saving Potter from the topic of the Black upbringing.

Potter tilted his head, curiosity lighting up his features. "Play something for me, then."

Regulus raised an eyebrow, his expression sceptical. "Why?"

Potter smirked, holding up another cookie while wiggling his eyebrows theatrically. “I’ll give you one of these.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but considered it.

The cookies *were* divine. *Truly* magical.

With a sigh, he relented and moved to sit at the piano. As his fingers hovered over the keys, he debated what to play; the setting felt wrong for stiff waltzes or the rigid etudes he’d practiced endlessly in his youth. Instead, his mind flicked to one of the silly melodies Isa had forced him to play over and over in the drawing room. He started to freestyle with it, letting the familiar tune spill out in a way that was softer, almost playful.

The sound of laughter broke his focus. Regulus’s fingers stilled on the keys as he turned to see Potter laughing outright, his head thrown back, his smirk wide enough to make Regulus’s stomach flip.

“What?” Regulus asked, his tone clipped, though he couldn’t hide his curiosity.

Potter smirked at him, his eyes sparkling with delight.

“Never, *never* in my wildest dreams would I have thought I’d see Regulus Black sitting in *Potter Manor*, playing a song by ABBA.”

Regulus frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

Potter’s smirk widened. “Do you even know what you’re playing?”

“No,” Regulus replied coolly, his fingers still resting on the keys. “It’s just a melody Isa insists I play all the bloody time.”

Potter let out a laugh, the sound warm and unguarded, filling the room. "You’re playing Muggle music, Black.” He leaned casually against the edge of the piano, far too close for Regulus’s comfort, and tilted his head with a teasing grin. “Keep going. It suits you.”

“Bloody Davies,” Regulus shot, rolling his eyes in irritation.

He resumed playing, though, letting his fingers wander through the melodies that Isa had forced on him – probably all stolen from ridiculous Muggle songs. Potter didn’t interrupt again, only watching with an expression that made Regulus feel oddly exposed.

When silence eventually settled over the room, Regulus lounged back

on the piano bench, crossing one leg over the other, his gaze flicking to Potter.

Potter had moved to the sofa, his Butterbeer half-finished on the nearby coffee table. He looked thoughtful, a bit contemplative, insecure even. It was a strange sight.

“How’ve your holidays been?” Potter asked, his tone casual but his eyes searching.

Regulus shrugged lightly. “Alright. Nothing particularly special.” He kept his tone neutral. “I’m spending them at Black Manor.”

“With Isa?” Potter pried, his voice careful, his expression unreadable.

Regulus narrowed his eyes slightly at the question, sensing something lurking beneath the surface.

“Yeah… she’s around,” he said, his tone clipped.

Potter’s gaze didn’t waver. “Every now and then, or…”

Regulus swallowed, his discomfort rising. He averted his eyes, pretending to focus on the fire.

“A little bit more, perhaps,” he admitted reluctantly. Then, because the air was growing far too heavy for his liking, he added sharply, “What’s this, Potter? What’s got your wand in a knot?”

Potter scratched the back of his head awkwardly, then reached for an issue of *The Daily Prophet* lying on the sofa. He tossed it across the room towards Regulus.

Catching it, Regulus unfolded the paper, his eyes falling on the moving photograph dominating the socialite section. It showed him and Isa dancing at the Christmas Ball. Isa’s face was buried in his chest, her shoulders shaking as if she were laughing, and he was pulling her closer, his own laughter breaking through in the image.

Regulus’s stomach dropped slightly.

It did *not* look good.

“You’re following me in the papers now, Potter?” Regulus asked dryly, yet feeling very uncomfortable.

Potter rolled his eyes, his irritation faint but present.

“It’s hard to avoid. You’re rather popular in the socialite section these days.”

Regulus glanced at the article’s title – ‘*young love blossoming*’ – and promptly threw the Prophet back onto the sofa.

“There’s nothing between me and Isa,” he said, his voice firm and slightly exasperated. “She’s still heartbroken over the break-up with Davies. She just needs… a friend right now.”

Potter arched an eyebrow, clearly not entirely convinced.

“You’ve dodged my question, though. She’s just ‘popping by every now and then’?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, exhaling sharply.

“She’s been having issues with her parents,” he admitted, his tone now clearly exasperated. “So, yes, she’s staying at mine most of the time.”

“Nights too?” Potter pressed, his voice careful, measured.

“Yes, nights too,” Regulus admitted awkwardly, his cheeks flushing slightly. He pointedly avoided mentioning the fact that they shared a bed. “But it’s nothing – and besides, my friends are always stopping by, and so is Cissy. It’s an open house at Black Manor these days.”

Potter visibly relaxed, a flicker of relief passing over his face.

Regulus tilted his head, eager to direct the conversation into another direction.

“So, I assume my brother’s been staying here?”

Potter nodded.

“Yeah. He’s off visiting his girlfriend today and tomorrow, though.” He paused, then added, “My parents are on a trip, and Remus—”

Regulus interrupted sharply, his tone laced with sarcasm. “The werewo— Lupin’s staying here too?”

Potter nodded, his expression mild. “Yeah, most of the holidays.”

Regulus let out a laugh, unable to contain it. There was just something very funny about the idea of Sirius – the disowned heir to the Black family – and a werewolf comfortably housed by the Potters.

“Ah, Potter Manor — a bit like a dog shelter, then?”

Potter laughed at this, much harder than necessary, his laughter almost uncontrollable. Regulus frowned, feeling like he was missing his own joke.

Potter wiped at his eyes, still laughing. “C’mon,” he said, gesturing for Regulus to follow him. “Let’s go. I’ll show you the pitch. Time for some Quidditch.”

*****

“So, this is the famous Potter Quidditch pitch?” Regulus asked with a smirk, his eyes scanning the snow-covered field.

The pitch was nestled on the estate’s grounds, bordered by tall trees dusted with frost, the faint charm of its homemade nature only adding to its charm.

They hadn’t bothered with formal Quidditch gear, instead opting for warm, magically-heated clothes. Their breaths formed faint clouds in the cold air as they crossed the field, each carrying a broom borrowed from the shed by the pitch — a small, cluttered structure overflowing with Quidditch gear and other oddities.

The more corners of the estate Regulus discovered, the more he realised how wildly different Potter’s childhood must have been from his own.

“Yes,” Potter said, his chest puffed out proudly. “Dad built it when he realised I had a knack for Quidditch — wanted to cheer me on and all.”

“Does he play?” Regulus asked, following Potter onto the pitch, the snow crunching softly beneath their boots.

“He used to,” Potter replied, his voice tinged and a flicker of sadness briefly crossing his face. “He’s, you know… getting on in years. But he’s still my biggest supporter.”

There was a brief, heavy silence, before Regulus gave a small nod. Without another word, they mounted their brooms and shot into the air.

The first few moments were exhilarating — sharp gusts of icy wind whipping past, a sensation of weightlessness that unknotted every bit

of tension in Regulus's chest. They tossed the Quaffle back and forth, accompanied with their laughter and the occasional taunt.

Even though he saw Potter on a broom at least three times a week during practice, he still managed to amaze Regulus. Of course Potter's father had built the pitch to cheer him on – Potter was flawless, *mesmerising* in the air. His movements were fluid, effortless, perfect; much like his aim, which was astonishingly precise and nonchalant at the same time.

Regulus smiled from afar as Potter dove to catch the Quaffle, and allowed himself to admire it, to admire him.

Yet, his keen, observant eyes soon picked up something else. Regulus had grown to know Potter well enough to recognise the gleam of mischief in his eyes, the crooked smirk that promised trouble. On top of that, Regulus *had* grown up with Sirius, so he'd developed a finely tuned radar for impending chaos, especially in any setting involving snow.

So somehow, before he could even register Potter's snowballs hurtling toward him, his reflexes kicked in; wand already drawn, Regulus conjured a flurry of snowballs in response, sending them flying toward Potter with impressive precision.

Potter let out a loud, exaggerated yelp as he dodged the assault, speeding away on his broom. Regulus smirked, giving chase, his wand flicking to send another wave of snowballs through the cold air. The two spiraled through the sky, shouting and laughing, snowballs colliding and exploding into puffs of powder as they flew.

Finally, Regulus veered off course, abandoned his broom and landed gently in the snow. He scooped up a handful of snow, expertly packing it into a ball, and hurled it at Potter with pinpoint accuracy. It struck his shoulder with a very satisfying thud, drawing an indigent, dramatic gasp from Potter as he landed a short distance away.

"Oh, so it's war now, is it?" Potter shouted, discarding his broom and bolting toward Regulus, snow flying with every step.

Regulus laughed, dodging his advance and lobbing another snowball.

"Britain's most promising Chaser, my arse — you can't even throw a proper snowball, Potter!"

"Oh, you're one to talk!" Potter shot back, narrowly missing Regulus

with a counter-attack. “That aim’s nothing to brag about, Black!”

They circled each other in the snow, tossing taunts and snowballs with increasing speed and hilarity. By the time Potter managed to tackle Regulus to the ground, both of them were breathless with laughter, their cheeks flushed from the cold and exertion.

Potter grinned triumphantly as he pinned Regulus down, his hair wild and dusted with snow. Snowflakes clung to his neck, slipping beneath the collar of his warmed clothes in a way that made him shiver.

Shit, that was cold.

Regulus retaliated by shoving a handful of snow into Potter’s face, earning a loud yelp as Potter sputtered and laughed, collapsing onto his back in the snow.

Regulus followed, leaning over him, his hands braced in the snow on either side of Potter’s head.

And then, he froze.

Their laughter faded, leaving only the sound of their breathing mingling in the cold air. Potter’s brown eyes sparkled, the golden light of the setting sun dancing across his face. His expression softened, turning into something achingly vulnerable and intimate.

It was inevitable. Irresistible. Like a magnet. Like a moth to a flame.

Regulus swallowed hard, his heart thundering in his chest. Then, slowly, he leaned down and kissed him.

The first kiss was soft and tentative, as if they hadn’t seen each other for years, hadn’t touched each other for times. Potter responded instantly but gently, his hands sliding up to the back of Regulus’s neck – in essence a cold sensation, but sending unparalleled warmth flooding through Regulus’s chest. Regulus tilted his head, his tongue softly grazing Potter’s lower lip, to which Potter responded by parting his lips with a quiet gasp that made Regulus reel with desire. The kiss deepened, their cold hands tangling in each other’s hair, the warmth of their bodies chasing away the cold of the snow.

Cold fingers tangled in hair, seeking and stroking and holding, the warmth of their bodies erasing the chill of the snow beneath them.

Regulus had no idea how long they lay there – their bodies turning

cold from the snow outwardly but on the inside warming up to each other, kissing and seeking, stroking and holding.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads resting together, Potter smirked against Regulus's lips. "You know," he said, his voice low and breathless, "this would've been the perfect moment to ambush you with some snowballs."

Regulus laughed softly, his lips brushing against Potter's as he replied, "How about a truce?"

Potter grinned, his hands still buried in Regulus's hair.

"Alright, alright."

*****

As to be expected, Regulus completely lost track of time – something that being around Potter often managed to achieve; he'd totally forget everything beyond the moment, leaving all the things that he faced outside the comfortable bubble he and Potter had created feeling distant and irrelevant. He didn't know whether it was a normal thing or whether it was the result of both worlds – the one with Potter and the one without – being fundamentally incompatible; as if bringing them together would lead to an explosion obliterating all from both worlds.

At some point it had turned dark and Potter had asked his House Elf to prepare some food in the dining room. Regulus had deliberately stayed hidden in the drawing room until the House Elf had disappeared – perhaps Potter's parents indeed wouldn't mind him being there, as Potter had pointed out, Sirius *would* very much mind, so Potter seemed happy with Regulus's discretion.

They ate mostly in silence, the air between them surprisingly still. For Regulus, though, his mind was anything but.

So, he had taken Potter's christmas gift with him – in his eyes a quite genius gift at that, too. He couldn't stop thinking about the small, polished box he had tucked away in his magically enlarged pockets. He had secretly worked on it every day during the holidays – not sure whether he wanted to actually give it to him or not, but having made it just in case. If he hadn't seen Potter over the holidays he probably wouldn't have gifted it anyway, for the momentum would've passed. But now, being invited during the holidays, just days after Christmas, he had decided to give it to him; yet, the decision had done little to

stop the chaos in his mind.

He wasn't sure why giving Potter a gift had suddenly become such an ordeal in his head. Was it even appropriate? Did people like them exchange gifts? And if they didn't…what did it mean that he had one? Shit, was he *pathetic*?

"You know," Potter said suddenly, breaking the silence with his trademark smirk, "if you put your thoughts on the table, they might be easier to digest."

Regulus glanced up briefly, caught off guard. His cutlery faltered for a moment before he set it down with a small sigh.

A very conflicting sensation tugged at him – on the one hand, he needed Potter not to make a big deal out of this; on the other, he wanted him to understand the significance of the gift.

He shrugged it off with what he hoped was an air of nonchalance

"I've got you a gift," Regulus said, his voice abrupt and far too matter-of-fact.

Potter froze for a second, his smirk softening into something more curious, his brows raising. "You do?"

Regulus scratched the side of his forehead awkwardly, avoiding Potter's curious gaze as he reached into his pocket. The action alone felt like a confession, and his nerves threatened to betray him entirely. Slowly, he placed the small, elegant box on the table between them.

Potter leaned forward, intrigued. "What's this?" he asked, his voice warm with curiosity.

The box was made of dark, polished wood with intricate inlays of silver and gold formed a delicate phoenix on the lid, its feathers shimmering faintly. A tiny clasp held the lid shut, engraved with the initials 'J.P.' in precise, deliberate script.

Regulus cleared his throat, pointedly ignoring the way Potter's curiosity and awe lit up his face.

"It's… a box. Obviously," he began, feeling unreasonably defensive. "But not just any box. It's charmed with preservation and multiplication spells. Anything you put in it — food, I mean — will stay perfectly fresh. And if you take a piece of it, the rest will

regenerate. Indefinitely."

Potter blinked, his mouth parting in astonishment. He opened the box carefully, his hands oddly reverent, and studied it as though it were the most remarkable thing he'd ever seen.

"This is…" His voice trailed off before he looked up, his expression equal parts awe and delight. "This is incredible. Do you know how advanced this magic is?"

Regulus shifted in his seat, eager to deflect the compliment. "I thought it'd be nice," he said, the words a little rushed. "For your mum's cookies and scones. So you'd… carry them with you. Always."

Potter's expression softened into something sentimental – his fingers brushing over the box almost absentmindedly. For a moment, he said nothing.

Regulus felt very overwhelmed and uncomfortable by the air of gratitude lingering around the table.

He cleared his throat again in an attempt to lose the sensation.

Potter seemed to notice and let his grin turn mischievous. "I must've done something truly spectacular to get a homemade gift from Regulus Black," he teased.

Regulus shot him a sharp glare, his voice low and warning. "Don't make this into something it's not, Potter."

Potter laughed, his eyes crinkling with genuine amusement. The sound was infuriatingly infectious, and Regulus found himself biting back a smile. After a moment, Potter's laughter faded into something softer, his expression turning sincere.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice playful yet a bit insecure, too. "I've got something unbearingly cheesy for you too. It's upstairs."

*****

Potter's room was an ordered, cosy mess — so perfectly in lieu with the rest of the house. The space was large, with soft, deep red carpeting that muffled their footsteps. The walls, however, made Regulus falter; they were covered in Gryffindor banners alongside Quidditch posters, all of them enchanted and flashing. The overwhelming red and gold clashed vividly with the cool, muted tones

that Regulus was used to in bedrooms, so it took a moment to adjust to the sensation.

Sure, Sirius had done a rather impressive job at Grimmauld Place of turning his room into a shrine to rebellion with the help of permanent sticking charms, but well – Potter's room was a whole new level of ostentatious.

In the centre of the room stood a wide, inviting bed draped in rumpled Gryffindor-coloured blankets, its headboard flanked by mismatched nightstands piled with books and trinkets. One corner of the room was littered by Quidditch gear – a pair of battered gloves tossed atop what appeared to be an incomplete set of practice robes.

Regulus's sharp gaze roamed the room, taking in the chaos with a mix of amusement and, frankly, mild judgment – he realised he was extraordinarily neat compared to Potter. Sure, he'd had a taste of it at Beauxbatons, but somehow Regulus did end up cleaning up most of their dorm, so now he got a glimpse of what would've been if he hadn't.

As his eyes swept over the wardrobe tucked into a corner, something caught his attention; a stack of leather-bound books sat perched precariously on top of it. He immediately recognised the generic bindings.

Regulus tilted his head, a smirk curling his lips as he pointed upward. "What's this?"

Potter, who had been lingering by the bed, stiffened. "Nothing," he said quickly, far too quickly.

Ha.

Regulus let out a low, victorious laugh, stepping forward to reach for one of the books. It was heavier than he'd expected – its sturdy binding confirming his suspicion.

"Photo albums," he noted with an uncharacteristically wide grin. "I knew it."

Potter groaned audibly, his hand flying up in protest. "Put it back, Black."

He moved forward as if to snatch it, but Regulus sidestepped smoothly, holding the book just out of reach.

“Oh, come on,” Regulus teased as he flipped it open, his smirk widening wickedly. “You’ll let me see you naked, but a few baby photos are too much?”

Potter shot him a fierce glare. “You won’t get to see me naked anymore after this, Black.”

Regulus barked out a laugh, thoroughly enjoying the mix of dread and resignation on Potter’s face, before turning back to the album.

The album was chronologically ordered and carefully annotated in a neat, loving script that could only belong to Potter’s mother. The first photo showed a tiny Potter on his first birthday, his chubby face smeared with cake. Below it, the caption read: *Jamie’s First Birthday – Look at that frosting disaster!*

Regulus smiled warmly at the nickname. *Jamie*.

He turned the page to find more glimpses of Potter’s childhood. One showed a toddler Potter toddling unsteadily across the lawn, his delighted mother holding her arms out to catch him. Her hair was dark and sleek, cropped neatly to frame her kind face. Euphemia Potter’s warm brown eyes seemed to shine even through the photograph, her expression a mixture of pride and boundless affection.

Another picture was labeled: *First Flying Lesson!* It depicted a tiny Potter gripping a toy broomstick, his legs dangling comically as he hovered inches above the ground. Beside him, his father, a tall man with unruly black hair and a slightly softer jawline than his son’s, grinned as though this was the greatest achievement he’d ever witnessed.

“You were an absolute menace, even as a baby,” Regulus concluded, his voice soft with amusement.

Potter rolled his eyes and was clearly torn between retreating out of embarrassment and leaning closer to peer at the photos himself.

Then came the embarrassing ones: a grinning eight-year-old Potter in oversized glasses, his front teeth missing, holding up a frog. Another showed him covered head to toe in mud with the caption: *Jamie's Quidditch dive gone wrong.* Regulus laughed aloud, uncontrolled and genuinely.

Everything about Potter Manor, including this photo album, seemed to

shout love and affection. Regulus had always known Potter was loved by his parents — the fact seeping through Potter's stories as part of his 'memory training' back at Beauxbatons. Still, knowing of it was different than experiencing it; and here, at Potter Manor, surrounded by tangible evidence, he *felt* it.

The love was palpable, woven into every corner of Potter's home.

The Quidditch pitch built especially for him.

The scorch mark on the carpet in the sitting room, framed like a piece of art, marking Potter's first magical outburst as a toddler.

The countless photos scattered throughout the house — not static, cold family portraits like those at Grimmauld Place, but snapshots full of spontaneous laughter and joy.

Of course Sirius had switched sides.

The Potters had clearly given Potter everything that Sirius had dreamed of. A childhood filled with unconditional love, room to be himself, and no crushing expectation to meet. Being James Potter, as he was, had always been enough. And with Potter's parents welcoming him with open arms, *of course* Sirius worshipped them. *Of course* he had latched onto the Potters so fiercely. Sirius had found here what he'd always craved and never received.

Regulus knew the feeling all too well. He longed for it too — to be loved unconditionally, to be good enough just as he was.

The difference, though, was that Sirius connected their loveless childhood, their cold upbringing with traditionalism. And he understood – understood that once Sirius had been perhaps old enough to understand what he had missed, had only been surrounded by friends from non-traditional families. Because if he had – if he'd had friends from traditional pureblood lineage, he'd understand, he'd see that being loved or not had nothing to do with traditionalism or modernism.

Regulus thought of Evan – raised in a traditional pureblood family, yet Evan had always had what Potter had had; unconditional love, a mother fussing over him constantly, sometimes to the point of irritation, but always out of affection, never out of fear of societal judgment.

Regulus through of Aunt Druella and Uncle Cygnus – sure, they had

broken relations with Andromeda after she'd eloped, but Regulus knew that Aunt Druella ached for her daughter's closeness like any other loving mother, and that their estranged relationship would've probably turned out quite differently if Aunt Druella hadn't also had Bellatrix to contend with – or Walburga Black as a sister-in-law. And all the love she couldn't give Andromeda, she poured into Cissy.

No. Unconditional love had nothing to do with tradition or modernity. It wasn't about rules or values.

You were just either lucky to be born into it, or you weren't.

Regulus was too lost in thought to register that much time had passed, had even temporarily forgotten about Potter in the room.

He turned the page again, to a photo showing Potter standing on Platform 9 ¾, a nervous smile on his face as his mother clutched him in a fierce hug.

The caption below read: *Jamie's first Hogwarts Express – September 1st.*

Regulus's fingers hovered over the image, his amusement dimming as a strange tension seeped through. Sure, he wanted to see more of Potter, especially through his mother's eyes, but he also knew what would come next now they had reached his Hogwarts years.

Pictures of friends, pictures of Sirius.

The thought settled heavily in his chest.

Potter must have noticed his hesitation, because he cleared his throat.

"So," he began, his voice unusually low, "how about your Christmas present?"

Regulus blinked, snapping out of his thoughts. He closed the album carefully, turning to Potter. Something about his posture caught Regulus off guard; Potter was shifting on his feet, his characteristic smirk and confident demeanour entirely gone. He looked… nervous.

Regulus arched a brow, curiosity flaring. What sort of present could possibly turn the confident, smirking Potter with his eyes twinkling with mischief into someone so anxious and insecure?

Potter crossed the room to his wardrobe, opening it with a rather failing attempt to come across nonchalantly. He reached inside and

retrieved two small boxes. Regulus's gaze immediately picked up on the details: the size, the velvet texture — they looked suspiciously like jewelry boxes.

Potter hesitated for a moment, then, as if unable to stop himself, began to ramble.

"Alright, so maybe it's a dumb idea," he said, words tumbling out in quick succession. "But I was just thinking, you know, we've gotten so used to each other's company, and well… I thought, if one of us ever felt… empty, or something—"

He gestured vaguely, the motion as erratic as his speech.

Regulus, watching this unravel, found himself growing amused. The sight of Potter, normally so confident, reduced to this bundle of nerves was unexpectedly endearing. Regulus felt a warmth spread through his body.

Potter was still rambling. "—and I don't know, it just made sense at the time. But now, looking at them, it feels—"

"James," Regulus interrupted softly.

Potter froze, his head snapping up at the sound of his first name on Regulus's lips.

Regulus took the box, his fingers brushing the velvet surface briefly before he opened the lid.

Inside, nestled against the dark lining, was a lapel pin. It featured both a snitch and a quaffle - the snitch's wings shimmered faintly, enchanted to move as if caught in a light breeze, while the quaffle gleamed with a subtle finish.

Etched delicately on the back of the pin was a short inscription: *Flying together, always*.

Regulus stared at the pins for a moment, the thoughtfulness of the gift pressing heavily against his chest. He looked up at Potter, meeting an uncharacteristically unsure gaze.

"They're enchanted," Potter added quickly, as if he needed to fill the silence. "If one of us holds it and thinks about the other — really thinks about them — it warms up."

Regulus didn't respond right away, still caught in the depth of the gesture.

The silence stretched, and Potter's panic grew. "It's too cheesy, isn't it? I let myself go too much. Oh, I'm sorry, I—"

Regulus shook his head firmly, cutting Potter off. Without a word, he rose from his seat, closing the small distance between them.

Potter opened his mouth to say something else, but was cut short by Regulus.

He gently cupped Potter's face, his fingers brushing along his jawline. He took in the deep, vulnerable expression in Potter's brown eyes, the faint tremble in his lips, and something surged inside him as he realised, *felt* how bloody beautiful Potter was.

So bloody beautiful.

Without hesitating, he pressed their mouths together, firm and unyielding. Like usual, it started soft and gentle, but it turned heated very quickly. When Potter made a surprised sound against his lips, Regulus took the opportunity to deepen it, his tongue sweeping inside.

The spark between them ignited into something hotter, consuming, as Regulus's hands moved to grip Potter's shoulders, pulling him closer, wanting more, needing more. He tilted Potter's head to angle the kiss better, and a low moan escaped from his throat as their bodies pressed together.

Potter's hands slid to Regulus's waist as Regulus surged forward, pushing Potter back. His movements were deliberate, calculated, yet frantic as he was fueled by a desire, a need he couldn't suppress.

Potter's legs hit the edge of the bed, and he toppled onto it, his eyes wide and dazed as he looked up at Regulus.

Regulus climbed after him, his knees pressing into the mattress on either side of Potter's hips as he leaned down, their lips crashing together again. The weight of Potter beneath him, the vulnerability in his eyes, the heat of his body, the feel of his chest rising and falling rapidly — it made Regulus indescribably, unbearingly hard. And when their hips shifted, when he felt the unmistakable press of Potter's arousal against his own, a ragged moan tore from his lips.

Potter gasped, his head falling back against the pillow, exposing the

long line of his throat, and Regulus couldn't resist. He kissed along his jaw, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses down the column of his neck, tasting the salt of his skin and smelling his familiar scent. His hands moved restlessly over Potter's chest, skimming over muscle and bone, before gripping his sides to hold him steady.

"James," Regulus breathed, his voice trembling, raw with restraint. He didn't miss the way Potter's eyes darkened, arousal flickering like a flame at the sound of his name. "Tell me to stop if—"

"Don't," Potter interrupted, his voice hoarse, laced with a need that mirrored Regulus's own. He tugged at Regulus's shirt, his fingers brushing warm skin. "Don't stop."

The surrender in his tone undid Regulus completely. He kissed him again, fierce and claiming, their mouths moving together in a rhythm that left him breathless. His hips pressed forward, grinding against Potter's, and the friction sent a jolt of pure pleasure racing through him. He groaned, the sound muffled against Potter's lips, and when Potter moaned in return, soft and desperate, it only made him move harder, faster, the tension spiraling higher.

Breaking the kiss, Regulus dragged his lips lower, leaving a trail of fire as he kissed down Potter's neck, his collarbone, the hollow of his throat. He heard Potter's breath hitch as he worked his way down, his hands sliding along Potter's sides, gripping his hips firmly as he kissed his chest, the hollow of his stomach, and lower, lower, lower.

He was completely, utterly lost – lost in the sensation of Potter wanting him as desperately as he wanted him – the heat of Potter's hands clutching at his back, moaning his name.

Reg.

He was completely swept off his feet, again, by how Potter's hands moved over him, the way his lips parted. He could feel Potter's smirk against his skin, playful, teasing, and yet all traces of banter fell away when Regulus touched him, kissed him, explored him with devotion.

Nothing mattered, nothing mattered but the chase of this – the chase of desire, too much yet never enough at the same time. He lost sense of all the layers, all the cloaks that wrapped his soul, that veiled his heart. Because here, warm and sweaty, reeling with desire yet calm in his heart, soft words and kind encouragements spilling over their lips, Regulus felt that he truly was.

Afterwards, they lay entwined in the rumpled sheets coming down from the moment.

Regulus turned his head lazily, a teasing smirk on his lips. “I thought I wouldn’t get to see you naked again?”

“Yeah,” Potter answered, letting out a low laugh. “Guess I lied.”

Regulus snorted and then sighed. He let his gaze drift to the pin on the bedside table. He reached for it, rolling it between his fingers thoughtfully.

Potter propped himself up on one elbow, watching him. “You really like it?”

Regulus let out a soft laugh, his lips quirking. “Yes, of course.”

Potter tilted his head, a nervous edge lacing his voice. “The design? The colours?”

Regulus turned the pin over in his hand, studying the intertwining quaffle and snitch. “The design is perfect,” he answered, his voice quieter now. His gaze caught on the black and gold shades, and his expression shifted, thoughtful.

“Black and gold.”

Potter nodded, his tone softening.

“Yes. You know … black for you, obviously. And gold … for me. You know, the Gryffindor colours, the Potter family crest…”

Regulus nodded slowly, his thumb brushing over the edge of the pin.

“I like it,” he said, his voice steady. “Black and gold.”

Potter smiled faintly, leaning closer. “Yeah,” he said, his voice dropping to a murmur. “I’m rather fond of it too. Of Black and Gold.”

*****

The next morning, Regulus woke up in a deeply disturbing way — literally and figuratively.

He had no idea when he’d fallen asleep — the last thing he remembered was Potter animatedly and very enthusiastically rambling about their first Quidditch practice after the holidays. Regulus had

been too knackered to contribute much in return — he'd nodded and made some sounds in response but the rest of his mind had been occupied with the reality, the realisation that he couldn't afford to fall asleep there. It'd be too risky — they were vulnerable, sleeping at night, and Isa might ask questions. No, it was better to be grateful for what they'd had and could've had and return to Black Manor.

Well, that plan had failed.

And now he was screwed.

The voice reached him first – distant at first but growing closer as he stirred awake. His eyes fluttered open, taking in the state of the room; nothing too scandalous, yet there was the photo albums scattered on the floor, Potter's sweater and trousers in one corner, Regulus's blouse near the door, his pants by the wardrobe…

Enough to illustrate that Potter had had company and what said company had done.

"Prongs?" the voice called.

And then Regulus recognised the voice; it was the werewolf.

"Potter," he hissed, shaking the Potter's bare shoulder. Potter's arm, heavy and limp, was draped possessively over Regulus's stomach.

"Mmm?" Potter groaned groggily, his face half-buried in the pillow.

Regulus didn't wait. Snatching his wand, he summoned his pants and trousers in quick succession. He'd barely pulled them halfway on when—

"Hey, Prongs? You in there?"

"Shit, is that Moony?" Potter mumbled, still half-asleep.

Regulus's panic surged to blinding heights. Even if he managed to dress himself in time, where the hell was he supposed to *hide*? His pulse hammered as his eyes darted wildly around the room.

The wardrobe.

He could maybe, *barely*, fit.

"*Fuck*," he swore.

So fucking stupid.

So bloody stupid to come to Potter Manor.

So bloody stupid to end up in Potter's bed.

So bloody stupid to fall asleep.

Fuck.

"Stand still," Potter hissed, suddenly sharp, as Regulus fumbled with his trousers near the door.

"'Stand still'?" Regulus shot, his whisper venomous. "*That's* what you have to offer, Potter?"

"Shh!" Potter snapped back, yanking something from under the bed.

Fuck, they were screwed.

"Prongs, you awake?"

Then, just as Regulus realised that the werewolf was at the other side of the door and that the door began to creak open, Potter's wand flicked in a quick, fluid motion.

Potter had thrown a *silencing spell* on him.

What?

And before he could process *that,* Potter threw something over him, and… *what the actual fuck*.

His legs – gone, his hands – gone. In fact, his entire body was gone.

No way.

No fucking way.

Potter had an *invisibility cloak*?

It was a very good thing that Potter had silenced him, because he wouldn't have been able to suppress the gasp coming out of his mouth otherwise.

The door opened.

"Morning, Moony," Potter said, feigning casualness. He leaned back

against the headboard as if this were any other day, but Regulus noticed the slight discomfort in his eyes.

“Hey,” Lupin greeted, stepping inside. His sharp eyes swept the room once before landing on Potter. “You’re up late.”

“Am I? What time is it?”

“Two.”

Yes, a *very* good thing indeed that Potter had silenced him, because this would’ve earned another loud gasp in shock.

Two o’clock?

“Oh,” Potter said, running a hand through his hair. “Guess I overslept. What’s up?”

Lupin gave him a scrutinising look, but Potter met it with infuriating nonchalance.

“Nothing, just thought I’d check in. You said you were seeing Mathilde today, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Potter nodded solemnly. “Thought she could use a friend. Me, Theo, and Bastien are all heading over later.”

Lupin nodded thoughtfully, but his eyes were scanning the room again, sharp as ever. Luckily Potter had summoned all his clothes under his bed, and Regulus had his sweater and his pants –

But not his blouse.

Regulus’s heart seized when Lupin’s gaze landed on it, crumpled near the door.

“Huh,” Lupin murmured, his brow furrowing. “Thought Sirius burned all that stuff.”

Regulus froze. His blouse bore the unmistakable Black family crest embroidered on the hem.

Potter didn’t miss a beat. “Must’ve missed that one,” he said. “Anyway, I’ll get dressed so we can eat something before I head over to Mathilde’s, yes?”

Lupin nodded slowly and retreated with a kind smile. “Sure, see you

downstairs."

As soon as the door closed and Lupin's footsteps faded, Potter lifted the silencing charm with a flick of his wand.

It took a couple of seconds for Regulus to get over his shock before he threw off the cloak.

"You — you —" he sputtered, clutching the shimmering fabric in his hands. It felt impossibly light and smooth, like nothing he'd ever touched before. He looked up at Potter, who was sprawled on the bed, smirking smugly. "You have an *invisibility cloak*?"

"Guess I do," Potter said with a maddening smirk.

"But — but —" Regulus stammered, still frozen in place, the cloak draped over his hands like something sacred. "They're so rare. My uncle's been scouring half the world for one and never found anything…"

Potter shrugged as he got up and collected his clothes from under his bed.

Then a thought hit Regulus.

"So – this," he said, realisation dawning on his face. He narrowed his eyes. "*This* is your secret recipe – all the pranks, how you sneak in places…"

Potter hesitated for a moment, caught between pride and the uncertainty of letting Regulus in on such a massive secret.

Regulus's amazement was short-lived, though, quickly replaced by cold reality. "This was a stupid idea," he muttered, pulling on the rest of his clothes. "Too bloody risky. What were we thinking?"

He ducked under the bed to retrieve his shoes, sliding them on in a few sharp, jerky movements.

Potter's expression hardened. "I rather enjoyed it, actually." His voice was cool, distant.

Regulus sighed, turning to face him.

"You know that's not what I mean, James."

Potter swallowed hard, his posture stiffening.

“I can’t — under any circumstances — be found in Potter Manor. Surely you understand that?”

Potter groaned, flopping back onto his bed. “Yes, I understand. Fine. Put the cloak back on when you walk to the fireplace – use the one in the library, I’ll distract Moony. Leave the cloak in there, and I’ll grab it when I head to Mathilde’s.”

Regulus nodded. “You’re still keeping in touch with them, then?”

“Yeah,” Potter said, standing and stretching. “They’re not like my Hogwarts friends, obviously, but we had a nice thing going. I probably wouldn’t have seen them until the next match if it weren’t for, you know, everything that happened to Mathilde’s family.”

Regulus froze mid-step, the blood draining from his face.

“What?”

Potter frowned. “You haven’t heard?”

Regulus felt his heart thunder in his chest, torn between the desperate need to know and the creeping dread of what Potter was about to say. “N—no. What happened?”

Potter hesitated for a moment, his tone growing somber. “I assumed you’d have heard from your Beauxbatons friends. It’s been rather big news in France.”

“Potter,” Regulus urged, his voice low and shaky. “What happened?”

Potter sighed, sitting back on the edge of his bed. “It’s awful. When Mathilde and her mother were travelling home from Beauxbatons, they were kidnapped — held for ransom.”

Regulus’s knees nearly gave out beneath him. “What?”

Potter continued, his expression dark. “Apparently, some shady people her father dealt with in his potion-supply business were after him. He’d gone into hiding, but they captured Mathilde and her mother.”

Regulus started to feel alarmingly lightheaded.

“They managed to escape safely,” Potter continued, “but Mathilde’s father — he didn’t make it.”

Regulus’s world blurred. The edges of the room tilted and swirled as

nausea gripped his stomach.

“That – that’s horrible,” Regulus managed to croak, his mind racing – what had happened? They weren’t supposed to *kill* him – they were supposed to *recruit* him.

He had been *killed*?

No, no, *no*.

He hardly registered anything as he finished dressing and collected his stuff, his hands slightly trembling. He had a hard time covering his panic from Potter – sure, anyone would be shocked by such news, but to faint at the very spot would be a rather strong reaction. He put on the invisibility cloak, left the bedroom with a small smile at Potter, and hurried to the fireplace.

No.

Chapter 15: Of Celebrations & Silence

As he stepped through the fireplace and went to take a shower, Regulus's mind was foggy with thoughts, ideas and considerations.

They'd killed him. They'd killed him.

It made no sense.

They wanted him for his information, his connections – wanted to recruit him… killing him was counterproductive, and thus completely illogical.

Regulus's thoughts spiralled.

Perhaps he'd refused to join — it wasn't unlikely; he came from a fiercely modernist milieu, his three brothers being the political centre of modernism in France. Still; even then, killing him made no sense. It served no purpose.

Or did he perhaps put up a fight? Was it either him or the one who killed him? *Who had* killed him?

Yes, it was the only logical explanation.

If it had been a pointless murder, why spare Mathilde and her mother? They could've offed them all — yet they hadn't. There probably hadn't been a choice.

Regulus was so preoccupied with the endless scenarios running through his head that he didn't register Isa's entrance when she entered the drawing room.

Regulus sat on the sofa, his elbows in his knees, face resting in his hands as he stared into the fireplace. His hair was still damp from the shower — too full of thoughts to bother with a drying spell.

"Hi," Isa said softly, cautiously, handing him a cup of coffee.

Regulus startled slightly, glancing up. "Hi." He took the cup. "Thanks."

Isa sat down beside him, watching him carefully.

"You — everything alright, Reg?" she asked gently.

Regulus nodded, his eyes somehow again drawn to the flames, as if hypnotised. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t return at night.”

Regulus nodded again, in the same fashion, still not breaking his gaze away from the flames.

“Yeah.” Then, as if snapped out of trance, he blinked and leaned back against the sofa. “You slept here?”

Isa nodded. “Yes — thought I’d wait for you.”

Regulus shot her a small, fleeting smile, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Thanks, but, yes…”

He placed the untouched coffee on the sofa table and rubbed his face with his hands, as if trying to wake himself from a dream, from this strange course of events; not just visiting, but *sleeping over* at Potter Manor — the heart of enemy territory — and finding out that Legot had been killed. Killed — something made possible only by Regulus’s actions, by his intelligence.

Life felt unreal.

“You want to talk about it?” Isa asked, her tone still careful but kind.

Regulus turned to her, taking in her warm brown eyes, so full of concern and contemplation.

He looked back into the flames.

Yes, he wanted to tell her. He wanted to spill everything; tell all about his mission to her — his best friend, who understood better than anyone what kind of world they’d born into, who would genuinely appreciate how he’d worked out the puzzle, who could reason with him about the reasons why Legot had been killed. Could explain why it wasn’t his fault. Explain that he hadn’t lifted his wand — hadn’t killed him. And explain that it had definitely been necessary, a last resort.

He wanted to tell her about Potter. How Regulus had found in him someone, the only one, who seemed to truly understand so many layers of him that he’d profusely concealed, repressed, wished dead for years. How he’d found in him the only one who he trusted with his heart, his body, his soul. And how wonderful it had been — to

experience genuine kindness and trust, to experience that intimacy wasn't about power, lust and control; but instead about appreciation, love and to be enjoyed by everyone involved.

And how marvellous, how *healing* it had been. But also how it'd eventually, inevitably break him. Because it wasn't allowed. It couldn't be. It wasn't normal.

Oh, how he wanted to lay everything bare, how he wanted to put his head in her lap, feel her fingers run through his hair and talk, talk, talk. Spill everything, take in her reassuring words and wisdom.

How he wanted the world to be different.

Because he didn't — he couldn't possibly tell her.

"Nah," he sighed. "Just… a long night."

Even if Isa had wanted to press further, she wouldn't have been able to due to the unexpected arrival of Cissy.

The sudden whoosh of the fireplace startled them both, making Regulus and Isa jump in their seats in surprise.

"Oh, hello," Cissy said, stepping into the room. She blinked, visibly surprised — she probably hadn't expected to floo almost directly in someone's lap, let alone to see Isa sitting besides Regulus. "Good afternoon, Isadora," Cissy said, her lips curving into a smirk, her eyes sparkling with mischief as they flicked between the two. "And Reg."

"Hi, Cissy," Regulus said, sitting straighter as he overcame the surprise at her appearance.

Then, as Cissy clearly remembered the reason for coming over, her expression turned serious and slightly panicked.

"Alright," she said briskly, a touch of urgency in her voice, "your Mother is coming over in a couple of minutes."

Regulus shot to his feet. "What?"

"Why aren't you dressed yet?" she continued, stressed.

"Dressed?" Regulus asked, startled. Dressed for — *oh* .

The meeting.

Cissy looked panicked. “If you want to slip away, Isadora, now would be a good time—”

Before she could finish her sentence, and Isa could take on her advice, they were met with another whoosh from the fireplace, marking the entrance of Mother. As she stepped out of the fireplace, the room seemed to chill, her presence commanding.

“Good evening, Mother,” Regulus said stiffly, his posture snapping into formality.

“Good evening, Mrs. Black,” Isa echoed, her voice small as she shifted uneasily.

Mother’s sharp eyes swept the room, darting sharply over Regulus — pale, unkempt, and still in Muggle clothes — and over Isa, who stood nervously beside him.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” Mother demanded.

“Oh, Regulus just mentioned was afraid to spill coffee over his nicest set of robes. He was just about to change, wasn’t he?” Cissy offered quickly, the lie rolling over her lips with impressive ease considering whom she was telling it to.

Regulus nodded. “Yes – I’ll be just a couple of minutes.”

And with that, he sped to the guest room, too stressed about the sudden realisation that tonight was the meeting – the *big* meeting – to feel sorry about Isa clearly being thrown to the wolves. He quickly dried his hair and put on his robes and his polished shoes that still felt too tight.

He took a deep breath before reentering the drawing room, where Cissy and Isa were talking in hushed tones. Mother paced the room with slow, deliberate steps – her movements were calculated and her robes rustled subtly as she walked with the air of a queen surveying her court.

They all snapped their heads towards him as he entered the room.

“Oh, Isa,” Cissy began casually, though there was an unmistakable undercurrent of calculation in her tone, “I think we’re having dinner later at my place. You’re welcome to join if you’d like.”

Regulus shot Isa a sharp, almost pleading look. He knew she’d

understand – dinner at Cissy's after the meeting meant the presence of many people who Isa would rather avoid; the Lestranges, Dolohov, Yaxyley…

Isa caught the glance and clear message, and smiled softly.

"That's kind of you, Narcissa, but I'm expected to eat at home tonight," she answered, her voice calm and measured.

Everyone rose from their seats as Regulus walked over to the fireplace. He swallowed as Mother stepped closer.

"Oh, see, Aunt Walburga," Cissy chimed with an airy laugh, "he's put on his nice robes."

Mother's sharp gaze swept over him, and for a moment, Regulus braced for her icy words – so he was very surprised when she reached out, her hands adjusting the collar of his robes with surprising care. Her fingers gently stroked through his hair, smoothing it into place.

Then, against all odds, to everyone's surprise, and *so* bizarre, *so* surreal that Regulus could hardly believe it – she smiled. A genuine, warm smile; the one that reached her eyes that now crinkled at the corners, the one that lit up her face, the smile that he so rarely saw, the one he could probably live off for years.

"Well, yes," she said with a note of pride, her voice soft and gentle. "He is the star of the night, after all."

Regulus blinked, stunned.

Star of the night?

From the corner of his eye, he could feel Isa's gaze burn into him, her curiosity sharp and unyielding.

"Yes," Cissy added smoothly, her voice taking on a conspiratorial lilt. "As he should be."

"Star… star of the night?" Regulus managed to stammer, his thoughts scattered by the unexpected phrase.

"Of course," Cissy said, nodding. "What you've achieved, Reg… it's impressive. Truly."

Mother nodded as well, her pride shining clearly now. "Yes," she agreed, her tone resolute. "You've made everyone proud."

You've made everyone proud.

You've made *me* proud.

Mother was proud. Proud of him.

Oh, how he had missed that feeling. A warmth spread through his chest, unfamiliar and overwhelming. It climbed to his throat, making it hard to swallow.

"Well, after you," Mother said, a small smile still tugging at her lips.

Regulus shook off the feeling in his throat and nodded firmly before taking another deep breath and stepping into the fireplace. The last thing he saw before being swallowed by the flames was Isa's curious and rather confused expression.

*****

To Regulus's utter disappointment, the meeting was hosted at Bellatrix's house. It didn't surprise him, of course — his cousin would do anything to claim prominence within the inner circle of the revolution. Hosting the first major meeting was undoubtedly a great honour, one she would've grasped with both hands.

Still, even though he'd expected it, it was with great reluctance and a nagging dread that he walked the long hall of the drawing room, his heart pounding in his chest, and his throat feeling drier than the world's finest parchment.

Mother and Cissy had stayed behind in the dining room – the meeting was only for those actively involved in revolutionary activities and missions. The reception afterward — luckily held at Cissy's place — would be open to a broader group, including others who supported the revolution in different ways: partners, administrative aides, or those who worked more behind the scenes, like Mother and Cissy.

So, Regulus had to walk the hall alone, which did little to ease his nerves or dry his sweaty hands. He had no idea who'd be present – he had an inkling, of course, but he hadn't attended many meetings over the last couple of months due to his stay at Beauxbatons, and he knew that the group of revolutionaries had grown.

There wasn't much worse than walking into a room, filled with Merlin knows how many revolutionaries, probably all much, much older and accomplished than him, all alone.

Regulus took a deep, shaky breath. Then, mustering whatever courage he could find, he placed his hand around the doorknob.

He wished, begged, to slip in unnoticed — to nod a polite greeting to the room, find a seat in the back, and blend into the shadows as a wallflower. Present, but unseen.

When he pushed the door open, it became painfully clear that this was *not* in the cards tonight.

The room was packed. Though he didn't know everyone personally, he recognised every face. Bellatrix had replaced the old rectangular table with an imposing black wooden oval one, its polished surface gleaming under the chandelier's light.

At the head of the table sat the Dark Lord himself, straight-backed and composed, exuding a quiet, commanding presence. To the Dark Lord's immediate left and right sat his most trusted lieutenants: Lucius Malfoy and Thorne, both radiating an aura of authority. Further down, Regulus spotted Rowle and Travers, who he vaguely remembered from the Christmas meeting last year. Bellatrix, of course, sat in her place of prominence, her husband Rodolphus beside her. Beside her husband was his brother Rabastan, and next to Rabastan sat Dolohov — the only ones even remotely close to Regulus in age, though still several years his senior.

The rest of the attendees were an imposing lineup of grown men. Among them Regulus noted familiar faces – Mr. Greengrass, Amaryllis's father, and his brother; Mr. Carrow, the twins' father; Evan's father, Mr. Rosier; Mr. Flint; and, his stomach jolted at the sight, Isa's father, Mr. Nott.

The sight of them — a room filled with powerful, seasoned men — made the blood drain from Regulus's face. He suddenly felt unbearably small and out of place; these were men with years of experience, wealth, and influence, men who commanded respect in their circles and held networks of connections that stretched far beyond anything Regulus could fathom.

And then there was him; a teenager, still in school, standing in the doorway with clammy hands and a dry throat, feeling incredibly young and inexperienced in the current crowd.

Unfortunately, Regulus couldn't enter unnoticed, for the moment his foot crossed the threshold, every face in the room turned to him.

He froze, unsure of what to do.

His mind scrambled for some semblance of protocol: a bow? A polite greeting?

Before he could decide, a short, tense silence descended over the room, suddenly broken by the sound of cheers and applause.

“The man of honour!” Yaxley declared with a smirk, raising his glass in mock salute.

Thorne clapped along with the others, his expression unmistakably proud. Across the table, Mr. Nott caught Regulus’s eye, offering a nod and a wink. The rest of the group followed suit, raising their glasses, applauding, or cheering as Regulus made his way to the lone empty chair. His knees trembled beneath him with every step.

How he *hated* to be the centre of attention.

The only silver lining – if he could call it that – was the reluctant, almost resentful manner in which Bellatrix joined the applause. She clapped with such reluctance that Regulus felt a glimmer of satisfaction at her jealousy. It felt oddly good to outshine her, to feel her frustration at not being the best, the one in the spotlight.

The Dark Lord clapped a few times, his deliberate movements quieting the room. When all attention was on him, he said smoothly, “Yes, yes. Regulus here has done an exquisite job. Congratulations are indeed in order. His discovery has advanced our cause tremendously.”

A wave of murmurs rippled through the room, and once again, Regulus felt the heat of countless eyes boring into him. He fought the urge to look down at his feet – instead, he forced himself to sit tall, his posture proud and deliberate, just as Mother had drilled into him time and again.

He very much tried to ignore the gnawing dread or hollow guilt in his stomach at the thought of Legot’s death.

The Dark Lord lifted a hand, his tone commanding as he called for attention.

“Alright,” he began, his voice calm but firm. “Now that we have secured the most essential lines of supply, we enter a new phase in this war.”

A tense silence fell over the room, so thick it was almost tangible.

The Dark Lord's words were measured and precise.

"Thanks to recent efforts, we have secured vital potion supply lines, along with several wand supply networks, streams of illegal funding, and channels for dark magic products."

Regulus, observant as he was, didn't miss the subtle and meaningful glances that accompanied these words: the Dark Lord's gaze flicked toward Flint as he mentioned wands, to Mr. Nott when speaking of money, and to Greengrass at the mention of dark magic products.

"So, this 'new phase,'" Yaxley drawled, leaning back in his chair with a smirk, "means we've gained more power, then?" His voice was laden with mockery. "We're finally pulling ahead?"

A few people chuckled, their laughter breaking through the tension in the room.

The Dark Lord's lips curved into a faint smile, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared. His expression turned sharp, serious. "Well, yes," he said evenly, "but so has the other side."

The laughter died instantly, replaced by a heavy, uneasy silence.

"We have intelligence," the Dark Lord continued, his voice calm yet weighted, "that the other side is gaining momentum. They are recruiting."

Bellatrix snorted loudly, her disdain palpable. "Who in Merlin's name would join them?" she sneered, her tone dripping with incredulity.

There were approving murmurs around the table, several heads nodding in agreement with her.

"You'd be surprised," the Dark Lord said, his voice cutting through the murmurs, "how many would align themselves with the modernists. Some out of sheer opportunism... others for more twisted, idealistic reasons."

Travers scoffed, shaking his head. "Like that lunatic Dumbledore," he hissed, "or the Potters."

At the mention of the Potters, Regulus felt his entire body stiffen. His chest tightened, and a wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm him.

He forced himself to steer his thoughts away from where he'd woken up that morning. His palms felt clammy, and sweat gathered at his temples as he fought to keep his composure.

Thankfully, the Dark Lord continued, sparing Regulus the need to respond or react.

"The other side isn't just recruiting," the Dark Lord said, his tone steady but menacing. "It's actively building an army. We have intelligence that they are preparing for war and have given themselves a name: the *Order of the Phoenix*."

The room erupted into derisive laughter and mocking remarks.

"*Order of the Phoenix*?" Bellatrix scoffed. "What – are they writing a children's storybook?"

"Ridiculous," Rodolphus sneered.

Mr. Nott leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "What does that mean for us, though?" he asked, his tone cautious.

"It means," the Dark Lord said, his voice slicing through the noise with chilling finality, "that we are now at war."

The mocking faded into a heavy, expectant silence as his words sank in.

"As long as we can, we'll keep our movements subtle, remain in the shadows. But the time has come to recruit. Everywhere." His gaze swept the table, pausing on Greengrass and Flint. "Certain individuals will be sent abroad." Then he turned to Lucius, Yaxley, and Mr. Nott. "Some of you will focus your efforts on the Ministry."

He shifted his attention to Lestrange and Dolohov before finally locking eyes with Regulus. "And others," he said, his tone deliberate, "will focus on the youth."

Regulus's heart stopped as the Dark Lord's cold gaze bore into him, pinning him in place.

"Everyone else has already been given their instructions," the Dark Lord continued, his voice smooth and commanding, "except for you, Regulus — as this is our first opportunity to speak directly."

Regulus nodded quickly.

“While you are at Hogwarts, you make an inventory of where its students stand. Who is loyal to us, who sympathises with the other side; assess their strengths, their backgrounds, their connections.” The Dark Lord paused, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Find out who can be useful, and who must be dealt with.”

Swallowing hard, Regulus nodded again. His mind raced with the importance of the task. He could already give some names – all his friends, for example, were dying to join the revolution. Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, Severus… He was sure there were more Slytherins from other years that’d join. Perhaps his own dorm mates, even – Crabbe and Selwyn. They were from the right families, after all…

The Dark Lord interrupted his thoughts.

“I trust you to do a great job,” he said with a faint, approving smile, his gaze lingering for a moment longer before turning his attention back to the broader table.

The meeting resumed, the conversation shifting to strategies for infiltrating the Ministry, but Regulus barely registered the words as his thoughts swirled around his new mission.

*****

The remainder of the holidays, Regulus devoted himself to O.W.L. preparation, writing for the *Pure Quill* and doing his best not to dwell on Potter or Legot.

Despite Thorne’s assurances, no one had spoken about the details of Legot’s capture or death. It seemed to Regulus that everyone simply assumed that those who needed to know had been informed, while those who didn’t need to know hadn’t — and that was that. Regulus found it unreasonable, unfair that he’d been evidently limped in with those deemed irreverent to the finer details while he had played a crucial role in the matter.

People merely celebrated the outcome, congratulated Regulus perfunctorily, and expected the matter to be left at that; life was to go on as though nothing had happened.

Regulus didn’t voice his frustration; he understood how these things worked. He was hardly the most important revolutionary out there — just a teenager, still unproven in the eyes of many, and absent from the action that had actually led to Legot’s capture. So he didn’t press and didn’t ask, though he felt a sting of something and an uneasy

undercurrent.

Little did he know that this feeling, the nagging unease in his gut, was a warning — a quiet omen of events yet to unfold, events that would shape his life in ways he couldn't yet imagine.

Now, however, he was capable of ignoring it and focusing on more pressing matters, like getting on top of his homework and steering his mind away from the memory of getting on top of Potter.

On one of the last nights before returning to Hogwarts, Regulus friends' had invited themselves over for some kind of end-of-holidays party. It was to be nothing special; just the usual crowd of Evan, Barty, Mulciber and Avery coming over for drinks, snacks and impromptu duels to show off the process they'd made with their little 'club' at Hogwarts.

Regulus had to admit that they'd actually improved their wand skills; especially Barty turned out to be rather gifted at magic as long as it aligned with his interests. He knew advanced magic, had developed a very quick draw and neat reflexes and had developed a strong interest in and talent for dark spells.

So, Regulus had notified Isa of the gathering — meaning she'd eagerly left for Melania's — and expected a typical evening when Evan stepped out of the fireplace in the entrance Hall and announced the impending presence of more people.

"Mulciber and Avery have invited Snape too," Evan announced, brushing soot from his robes as he made way for Barty, who followed a moment later, smirking broadly.

"Black," Barty drawled in greeting.

"Snape's alright," Regulus said with a nod. "I wondered why he hadn't turned up yet."

"Well yes, reckon he's been stuck at that Muggle house of his," Evan said darkly. "But he's managed to break free — been staying at Avery's the last few days."

Regulus nodded and began leading them towards the drawing room. Evan hesitated, scratching his head awkwardly.

"And — er — Lestrange and Dolohov are coming too," he said.

Regulus stopped in his tracks, spinning around to face them. “What? *Why*?”

Barty shrugged. “Who cares? The more, the merrier, right?”

Regulus raised an eyebrow – did it really take so little for Barty to forget the two blokes’ endless taunting about his dad?

“They overheard Avery and Mulciber talking about it,” Evan explained. “So they were more or less forced to invite them.”

The expression on Evan’s face betrayed that he clearly hadn’t yet forgotten about the blokes’ suggestive comments about Melania during the Ball.

“Great,” Regulus sighed. “Let’s wait for them, shall we?” Without another word, he turned back to the entrance hall, unwilling to let Lestrange and Dolohov roam Black Manor unsupervised.

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before the rest of the group emerged from the fireplace. Mulciber and Avery were laughing boisterously, Severus hovered at the edge of their circle, looking a touch out of place, and Lestrange and Dolohov greeted Regulus by clapping his back amicably – and a bit painfully, to be frank – holding up a bottle of alcoholic poison in their other hand.

“Let’s get the fun started, then,” Dolohov said with a smirk as they headed towards the drawing room.

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Truth to be told, the evening started off rather well.

They sprawled across the various sofas and armchairs, with the coffee tables quickly filling up with butterbeer, firewhiskey, mead, platters of snacks as well as scattered decks of Exploding Snap and Wizarding Poker cards. And when the mood struck, they’d move to the small, improvised duel area that they’d created by moving the sofas and fauteuils away to one corner of the room.

They filled the evening with lighthearted, funny duels and demonstrations of recently mastered spells, roaring with laughter at failed attempts, and with easy, stupid banter. The conversation was easy – often stupid, and mostly harmless. As usual, much of the talk revolved around Lestrange and Dolohov’s bragging about their jobs, encounters with girls, and the rest of the crowd chiming in with tales

from Hogwarts.

Regulus, as usual, didn't care much for their braggiest stories – and didn't believe half of them – and made it a point to disengage whenever the subject matter turned particularly tasteless, a tactic Severus often followed.

"So, any new birds?" Mulciber asked, his smirk broad as he took a long swig of firewhiskey.

By now, most of them — apart from Regulus and Severus — were at least four glasses deep and it was beginning to show. Tongues grew looser, Barty's jibes became sharper, and the room was rowdier in general.

"I heard Antonin had an adventurous night with Camellia Greengrass yesterday," Lestrange said, grinning as he clapped Dolohov on the back.

"You mean Amaryllis's cousin?" Evan asked.

"Yeah, your cousin's best friend," Lestrange added, glancing at Regulus.

"Wasn't she with Yaxley?" Regulus asked, uncharacteristically joining in. He recalled seeing them together at Cissy's wedding and had heard they were something of a fixture, at least according to Cissy's stories.

"Not last night she wasn't," Dolohov said smugly, leaning back into the sofa with a self-satisfied grin.

The room erupted into laughter.

Regulus ignored it, focusing instead on stopping Barty's ill-fated attempt to use his wand to pour himself more mead – without intervention, he'd have spilled half of it.

"How about you, Crouch? Still with that girl?" Lestrange asked.

"Who, Celine?" Barty drawled. "Nah." He waved a dismissive hand. "That bird's flown."

The room erupted in laughter again.

"He's set his sights on her best friend now," Mulciber added with a smirk. "The one with the piercing blue eyes."

Regulus tilted his head, surprised. Was Barty going after Eira?

“Warrington?” Dolohov asked, leaning forward. “Didn’t you shag her at some party, Black?”

Regulus choked on his butterbeer. People thought he’d *shagged* Eira?

“No,” he said cautiously, trying to keep his composure. “I didn’t.”

“Damn right you didn’t,” Lestrange said. “You’ve got Nott in the sack, after all.”

Regulus stiffened. He’d known it was only a matter of time before the conversation turned to Isa. Yes, it was infuriatingly annoying, but he had resigned himself to it the moment he heard Dolohov and Lestrange would be joining tonight.

Somehow, Isa seemed to occupy a permanent space in the fantasies of nearly every bloke in their circle. Yes, Barty and Evan were the exceptions — though Regulus knew that had more to do with their unwillingness to risk their friendships with him than any lack of interest. If the rumours surrounding him and Isa had been less intense and she’d so much as crooked her finger, they’d likely be eager enough.

Mulciber and Avery were no better, though they at least kept their interest relatively subtle compared to Lestrange and Dolohov – whose leering gazes and suggestive tones left absolutely no doubt about their thoughts or intentions. The only one unaffected by Isa, it seemed, was Severus, though Regulus suspected that had everything to do with the redheaded Mudblood who’d monopolised his attention.

“Yeah, what’s she like, Black?” Dolohov asked, his smirk thick with innuendo. “I bet she’s feisty.”

Lestrange let out a bark of laughter. “It’s always the uptight ones that are the wildest.”

Mulciber, Avery, and Dolohov roared with laughter, their voices echoing through the room, while the rest of the group exchanged uneasy glances.

“Bet she’s got those big doe eyes when she’s on her knees,” Dolohov added, his tone crude and unapologetic.

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face. The rage surged hot and

immediate, a war waging within him between the temptation to ignore them entirely and the overwhelming desire to stand up and punch both Dolohov and Lestrange square in their faces — swift, relentless, and without warning.

He forced himself to choose the former, fixing the pair with an unimpressed glare as he downed the rest of his butterbeer in one go.

“Just messing with you, Black,” Dolohov said, his laugh loud and unrepentant as he noted the dark, dangerous glint in Regulus’s eyes.

“Oi, Barty,” Evan cut in, his voice a touch too cheery as he jumped on the opportunity to defuse the tension. “Let’s see who can toss most points on the board. Reckon I’ll wipe the floor with you.”

Regulus truly couldn’t fathom what Dolohov and Lestrange were trying to achieve with their obnoxious, shameless comments about him and Isa. If their goal was to find out the state of their relationship, it was laughable – they didn’t stand a chance with her anyway.

Isa would never, under any circumstances, let a bloke lay so much as a finger on her unless he valued her for everything *beyond* her looks. He’d known her for so long, knew her through and through, inside and out, and knew perfectly well how Davies had won over her heart; by probably showing no interest whatsoever in the seemingly talentless, obnoxious pureblood girl who he must’ve initially assumed her to be, which would’ve drawn her to him like a magnet, even more as she came to realise he stood for so many things that resonated with her troubles with the traditionalist world; especially the role and worth of women.

Such a cliché.

No, he knew for a fact that Isa would never get near the likes of Dolohov and Lestrange, and they probably knew it too. They weren’t stupid — tactless, crude, and insufferable, certainly, but not stupid; so it was a complete mystery to Regulus what the two hoped to accomplish.

Still — it was highly annoying. Truly, utterly annoying that they had the guts to behave like this in *his* house, drinking *his* booze now their bottles were empty, sitting on *his* sofas and stuffing themselves with *his* food.

Completely fucking tactless.

When the topic finally veered away from Isa, Regulus felt an undeniable sense of relief, knowing they'd gotten it over with; surely the night would become more pleasant.

Or so he thought.

He should've remembered just how rowdy this lot became after a few too many drinks.

At first, it wasn't too bad. The conversation turned to hexing Gryffindors; the rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor had escalated into new, unprecedented levels of chaos this year. Regulus had seen glimpses of it during his visits to Hogwarts for practice, but most of what he knew came from Isa's exasperated retellings.

Apparently, a group of Gryffindors — Sirius most definitely involved, and Potter likely from a distance too — had launched an outright war against the Slytherins by sneaking dozens of skrewts into the Slytherin common room. The initial response from the Slytherins had been quite tame – afraid they'd be busted now that all the Professors' eyes were on the growingly intense situation between the houses.

But then came the posters.

They'd plastered them all over the castle, each one styled exactly like the *Pure Quill,* only this time the headline read *'Pure Filth'* alongside incriminating images of Slytherin students. And well, after that, not a week passed without a major incident between the houses.

Naturally, the heart of the Slytherin response team consisted of Evan, Barty, Mulciber, Avery, and Severus. Isa had made it abundantly clear just how mind-numbingly bored she was of hearing the boys endlessly discuss jinxes, hexes and dark pranks.

"I say we target them all together," Mulciber declared, his tone brimming with confidence. "All of the Gryffindors."

Regulus raised an eyebrow, half-concerned and half-amused by Mulciber's delusions of grandeur. "You're planning to jinx the entire house of Godric Gryffindor single-handedly, are you?"

"No," Avery interjected immediately, though his expression betrayed that he didn't consider the idea completely absurd. "Just the major ones."

Mulciber nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. We'll start with Pettigrew,

your brother, Lupin—"

"Aah," Barty interrupted with a smug grin, "that reminds me — Potter's back now, isn't he? Oh, this is going to be fun."

Regulus forced himself to remain composed, shrugging off the twinge of unease at Potter's name. Instead, he took a deliberate sip of his Butterbeer, letting the conversation move along.

"Yeah," Dolohov chimed in, as usual egging them on. "Rabastan and I came across a wicked jinx recently — it makes your limbs go completely lifeless."

Before Barty could ask where he could get his hands on such a spell — and he would have — Regulus snorted derisively.

"Jinx them all you like," he said, setting his drink down. "But make sure that Hogwarts' Captain and Beater can still play by the end of January. I want to smash Durmstrang."

Barty rolled his eyes dramatically. "Oh sure, Quidditch is more important than our pride, Black. Absolutely."

"'S got to be weird, being back from Beauxbatons," Avery said. He leaned back in his seat, thoughtful. "You missed a lot while you were away."

Regulus rolled his eyes.

"Don't be so dramatic. I visited you lot at least three times a week."

"Yeah, but it's not the same, is it?" Evan added. "A couple of hours a week doesn't really cut it, right? And you were mostly tied up with Quidditch during those visits anyway."

"True," Dolohov slurred, his voice betraying just how drunk he was getting. He gestured lazily toward Regulus, a sly grin spreading across his face. "And let's not forget, Black here had an important task keeping him busy at Beauxbatons."

Regulus froze, his body stiffening as he registered Dolohov's words. His heart skipped a beat, and his eyes widened. His mind raced, panic threatening to bubble up — Dolohov was talking about his mission in front of this crowd; the crowd of whom no one, except for Dolohov and Lestrange, knew anything about his mission at Beauxbatons or his position in the revolution in the first place.

Avery snorted, blissfully oblivious. “Yeah, I’m sure — chasing after French birds, I reckon.”

Dolohov laughed loudly, playfully punching Avery in the arm. “You nitwit,” he said, his voice dripping with a tipsy kind of glee. “Not that. He was working for the Dark Lord, wasn’t he?”

The room fell silent, all eyes snapping to Regulus. The air seemed to grow heavier as the others stared, their expressions shifting between shock and awe.

Regulus flinched inwardly, his mind racing.

Such a fucking, bloody stupid *idiot*.

“Shut up, Dolohov,” Regulus snapped, his voice sharp and commanding.

Dolohov smirked, either oblivious or choosing to ignore the alarming mix of fury and concern in Regulus’s eyes.

“Oh, come on, these are your best mates — surely they know all about your mission? I mean, you’re all anyone talked about for weeks. Everyone knows you pulled off what no one else could.”

The others exchanged wide-eyed glances, their expressions now a mix of stunned disbelief and admiration.

“I said, shut your bloody mouth, Dolohov,” Regulus pressed, his tone low, each word delivered with icy precision.

Lestrange, interjected smoothly, his voice cautious. “Yeah, Antonin, maybe better not discuss such matters—”

Dolohov waved him off, still grinning. “Oh, come on. We should celebrate, shouldn’t we? Little Black here, finding Legot, having him killed—”

Regulus didn’t know what it was – what exactly had been the last straw or the last drop. It could’ve been his endless, revolting comments about Isa that had grated on him for so long. It could’ve been his general demeanour regarding girls, the taunting of his friends or any person Dolohov deemed less worthy than him. It could’ve been the annoying drawling voice, the completely misplaced confidence. It could’ve been Regulus’s own feelings about Legot and their supposed celebrations.

He had no clue.

But it was the last straw. The last drop.

Before Dolohov could finish, Regulus shot out of his seat, his wand already in hand. With a sharp flick, he hit a non-verbal silencing spell squarely in Dolohov's face. The smirk vanished as Dolohov's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, his expression morphing into one of alarm.

Regulus's temper boiled over.

"Dolohov, you complete idiot," he hissed, his voice dangerously low, vibrating with fury. "There's a reason we *don't* talk about this stuff. Keep your bloody mouth closed. If you can't have a fucking drink without turning into a gossipy old woman, maybe stick to pumpkin juice next time."

He took a step closer, completely blind by his outburst of emotions and completely oblivious to the authority that radiated from his towering presence. "It's fucking dangerous. What do you think the Dark Lord would do if he heard about this little *chit-chat* of yours?"

Dolohov stared up at him, his usual smugness replaced by genuine shock. The rest of the group sat frozen, wide-eyed and silent. He could hardly blame them; it wasn't everyday that Dolohov got publicly berated by someone years his junior, nor that they talked about Regulus's task for the Dark Lord.

Evan looked at him wide-eyed, his expression somewhere between stunned and disbelieving. Barty held his drink still frozen in the air as though he'd forgotten he was holding it, while Severus looked at Regulus with an alarming intensity. Mulciber, Avery and Lestrange were glancing nervously between Regulus and Dolohov, clearly uncertain whether to intervene or keep still.

"And let me be absolutely *clear* about this," Regulus continued, his voice rising slightly. "You *don't* talk about the Dark Lord's tasks. Not to anyone. Not here, not anywhere. The next time I hear you running your mouth about anything confidential, I'll drag you to him myself and let him deal with you however he sees fit."

A tense silence settled over the group, thick and suffocating. Barty was still holding his stupid drink frozen in the air, while Evan had now wrapped his hands around his head in shock.

“And while we’re at it,” Regulus added, his voice now colder, sharper. “I don’t *ever* want to hear the name Isadora Nott come out of your mouth again. Not in this house. Not anywhere. She’d never let you lay so much as a finger on her, and for bloody good reason.”

His piercing gaze shifted briefly to Lestrange for emphasis before snapping back to Dolohov.

Dolohov, still silenced, could only nod.

Regulus lifted the charm with a flick of his wand, his eyes still locked on Dolohov. “Good,” he said curtly, lowering his wand.

As the heat of his anger ebbed, an awkward tension settled over the room. Regulus grew hyper-aware of how out of character his outburst had been, how he’d risen to the bait, how he’d let himself go. *Fuck*.

Needing a moment to compose himself, he nodded stiffly at the group and retreated to the kitchen under the guise of fetching more Butterbeer. The silence stretched behind him, thick and uneasy. *Fuck*.

He had silenced Dolohov — a Silencing Charm, of all things. A spell like that wasn’t just about shutting someone up but was a demonstration of power. Even a nasty jinx as Rictusempra would’ve been received differently, because a silencing charm, thrown on someone like this in public, was a clear and very harsh demonstration of power.

And here he’d used it on Dolohov, of all people.

Regulus leaned on the counter, gripping the edge to steady himself. He’d not only silenced Dolohov but also berated him in front of everyone. *Fuck*.

Oh, he was going to pay for this, wasn’t he?

But the reaction when he returned was nothing like he’d expected.

Dolohov wasn’t storming out, wasn’t brandishing his wand, wasn’t throwing hexes in retaliation. Regulus had braced himself for a hostile glare, maybe even a pointed insult or a grumbled threat. Instead, when he stepped back into the room, Butterbeers in hand, Dolohov and Lestrange exchanged glances that were… impressed. Approving, even…

Dolohov cleared his throat, looking up at Regulus with an expression

that seemed oddly contrite. “Apologies, Black. Won’t happen again.”

Regulus nodded stiffly and, without a word, set the Butterbeers on the table.

He ignored the awe-struck expressions from his friends – Evan’s stunned admiration, Barty’s barely concealed wicked grin and the others’ calculating stares – as he forced his posture into one of indifference, reached for his drink and dropped back onto the sofa.

Chapter 16: Of Jinxes & Receptions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Returning to Hogwarts was a strange affair after months at Beauxbatons. Yes, he had visited the castle multiple times a week for training, but visiting it briefly felt different than the prospect of reintegrating into Hogwarts life completely. It felt unnerving and odd to realise that he had to readjust to the life and dynamics that had always been second nature to him.

It started with the train ride — in essence, nothing special. He had flooed to the station alone; he knew that Mother couldn't bear the prospect of potentially running into Sirius, so he'd offered to go alone. It was better for him, too; that way he could arrive early, occupy their usual carriage and not risk walking into Potter.

Because, truth to be told, he had no idea how he was going to act in the presence of Potter and his friends. It had been awkward enough last year, when some form of friendship had blossomed between them and they'd occasionally found themselves in the company of their respective friends. But now it was different — the friendship boat had sailed; they had sealed something going way beyond that. They'd spent months sleeping in the same bed, woken up, limbs tangled. And now they were supposed to return back to normal — their only connection being through Sirius and their positions on the Quidditch team. And with their participation in the Unity Project being over, they had no occasions to see each other anymore besides practice, when they'd be surrounded by the rest of the team.

Regulus had no idea how to cope with this.

How were they expected to return to normal?

Was there still a point of return, even?

And would people notice? Would they see the flicker of intimacy in their eyes as they looked at each other? The one betraying they'd seen nearly everything of each other, had pushed each other to dimensions they hadn't known existed? Would they notice the bond that had been forged in the process?

Regulus swallowed at the thought of Isa's sharp eyes. She'd be able to

sense something immediately. She could read him like a treasure map — not being able to pinpoint everything at first sight, but knowing there was something there, and once she'd start digging and connecting, the pieces of the puzzle would undoubtedly fall into place.

So, during the train ride, while he occupied the compartment with his apparently new, fixed group of friends — Barty, Evan, Severus, Mulciber and Avery — he immersed himself in the last part of the book on Occlumency that Isa had given him, pointedly ignoring the conflicting sensation of dreading to run into Potter at some point while at the same time being pulled to him like a magnet.

"Check this out," Barty said, nudging Evan to draw his attention to the book on his lap.

It was still a strange sight to see Barty voluntarily reading a book for leisure.

"What's it about?" Regulus pried, closing his own book for a moment.

"Evan and I picked it up the other day in Diagon Alley," Barty said with a casual shrug.

Merlin, not just *reading* books, but *buying* them in bookstores during the holidays. This was a whole new bloody version of Barty and Evan.

How much could change in a few months – some discover the unparalleled thrill of their family's nemesis' naked body under the sheets. Others discover the joy of reading.

Oh , the delightful unpredictability of life.

"It's about altering human features," Evan chimed in. "Spells to make people bald, give them acne…"

"You're interested in human transfiguration?" Regulus asked, his brows knitting in confusion.

It was a rather interesting shift from the dark jinxes and curses they usually discussed.

"It's not *just* transfiguration," Barty replied, a smirk tugging at his lips. His eyes gleamed with the sort of dangerous enthusiasm that meant trouble. "Think of it as a group project. I'm sure there are a few Gryffindors who'd look better without eyebrows…"

Ah, there it was. The actual reason.

The compartment burst out into laughter — and even Regulus couldn't hold back a laugh at Barty's mischievous enthusiasm; at least he was spirited.

"Look, Evan," Barty said, pointing at a specific page with an unmistakable glint in his eye. "Enlarging body parts."

The two exchanged a wicked grin before bursting into laughter once again.

"You do realise it doesn't work that way, right?" Regulus interjected dryly.

"What doesn't?" Avery asked, grinning as if the answer were obvious.

Regulus sighed. "Enlarging… certain parts of the body—"

The group dissolved into uncontrollable laughter, the exact response he'd expected.

"—it throws off the body's balance," Regulus continued, unfazed. "Your body in its normal state is perfectly proportioned. Messing with it, especially for a longer period—"

"It doesn't have to be long-term," Mulciber cut in, a sly grin spreading across his face. "Short-term would do just fine…"

Another round of laughter overtook the compartment.

"Bloody hopeless," Regulus muttered, shaking his head as he returned to his book.

*****

Regulus managed to linger behind long enough to avoid the large crowd of students making their way to the carriages. He'd intentionally waited until the last moment to change into Hogwarts robes, put his book in his trunk and even pretended to have lost his wand in an attempt to stretch the time, while Barty and Evan complained the entire time about how they were at the brink of starvation.

The plan had worked though; when they exited the train, there were only a couple of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs left.

“Would’ve been brilliant to try the nail-growing spell before dinner,” Barty shot irritably.

“Sure,” Regulus replied dryly, “and brilliant to land yourself in detention before even reaching the castle.”

“Nah, we’re barely ever caught,” Evan pointed out with a smirk.

“True,” Avery chimed in. “We’ve only been in detention four times.”

“And twice because of Snape’s Mudblood,” Barty added, his voice dropping to a venomous whisper.

The downside to lingering behind became clear once they reached the Great Hall; arriving last meant fewer seating options at the Slytherin table. Sure, they were the golden group of their house, even among the older years, but it wasn’t realistic to expect everyone to shuffle around just for their convenience.

Their late arrival did much for their appearance, though; they entered the Hall last — Regulus and Evan in front, with Barty, Mulciber and Avery in the middle and Severus trailing awkwardly behind. Regulus pointedly avoided looking at the Gryffindor table, afraid to find that familiar set of brown eyes.

As he shot his friends behind him a quick glance, he groaned in exasperation. Barty, Mulciber and Avery walked smugly and proudly — with puffed chests and a deliberate, slow pace, as if they owned the very stone floor beneath their feet.

Suppressing another groan, Regulus quickened his pace to the Slytherin table, determined to put some distance between himself and his companions. Unfortunately, though, his efforts were only rewarded with a new frustration – every seat along the edge of the table, with its protective back to the rest of the Hall, was taken. Barty, Mulciber, and Avery had claimed them all.

With a resigned sigh, he dropped into a seat facing the Great Hall.

He tried to busy his mind with the conversations around him — he eavesdropped on some fourth years nearby, discussing their classes, he tried to be invested in the conversation between Mulciber and Severus on a new version of Exploding Snap to be launched soon.

And when that didn’t help, when it didn’t put his mind off the presence at the Gryffindor table that he avoided looking at, he

thought about his classes. The new Defence teacher was supposedly horrible — some ministry approved dork who could barely keep order in the classroom. He'd only seen her twice in the first week at Hogwarts and hadn't been able to conclude much based on that, so he was very curious about the classes that were his favourite last year. He was looking forward to Transfiguration and Charms too; he's covered most of the year's material in his revisions over the holidays and it'd be interesting to apply it in class. His schedule was tight, though — much more than it had been at Beauxbatons. And with practice at least three times a week…

Subconsciously, although he'd tried to avoid it, although he had tried to steer his mind away from that one person in the Hall, his eyes drifted towards the Gryffindor table.

They found him instantly.

Potter was sitting next to Sirius and the werewolf, apparently not too immersed by what seemed to be an animated story from Sirius. Regulus's chest tightened as his gaze lingered.

He looked at Potter's messy hair, the feel so distinctive, so unique when Regulus ran his hand through it. He held up a fork with his hand — big, perfect Chaser hands that were surprisingly gentle and soft when they ran over Regulus's body. And if this wasn't enough, wasn't enough temptation already, Regulus noticed how Potter had his bottom lip caught between his teeth, deep in thought. The bottom lip that Regulus had playfully bitten so many times, teasing, never disappointing to coax the most intoxicating sounds from Potter's throat.

Their eyes locked, and a flash of surprise crossed Potter's face, quickly replaced by something warm — and something shy. Regulus felt his breath hitch, his heart stuttering in his chest. He swallowed hard and allowed the barest twitch of a smile to pull at the corner of his lips before forcing himself to look away.

Damn.

What was he going to do?

*****

The first week back at Hogwarts would've been intense in any way – getting back into the rhythm, the subjects, the dynamics he hadn't been a part of for so long and finding his footing with whatever was

and could still be going on between him and Potter – but the newly escalated jinx war between Regulus's friends and basically anyone that crossed their paths really did add to the chaos.

The first day was filled with classes and flew by as he tried to gauge what he was expected to know and be able to do after being gone for months. He concluded that Isa had done a pretty good job at instructing him over the holidays; there was barely anything that he hadn't familiarised himself with.

Regulus sat next to Isa during all their classes, sharing a mix of amused and alarmed glances at the sight of Barty and Evan, who always sat nearby. They brought their new book as if it were a sacred text, sneaking it open in their laps under the table during lessons and discussing it over lunch.

Regulus was positive that his two friends would be able to recite it word for word by the end of the day. Impressive as that was, it was starting to alarm him; Barty was known to be impulsive, especially when people pushed the wrong buttons.

Still, despite the nagging feeling that things were going to escalate – and that Regulus didn't particularly care to be part of any of it, being too preoccupied with so many other things – he couldn't help but burst into laughter; a loud, genuine, almost barking laugh that would've made Sirius proud erupted from him at the sight of Barty and Evan joining them for lunch.

Completely bald.

They strolled into the Great Hall with an air of nonchalance – their shiny, bare heads gleaming under the enchanted ceiling. Whispers spread through the hall, punctuated by stifled giggles and outright laughter with several students pointing fingers at the two.

Barty and Evan, though, looked utterly unfazed; if anything, they looked strangely proud – strutting towards the Slytherin table, their chests puffed and ignoring all the buzz around them.

Isa and Regulus exchanged a glance as they settled down at the table, then burst into laughter again.

"What happened to you?" Isa managed between fits of laughter, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Nothing much," Evan shrugged nonchalantly. "We had a nice chat

with your brother and Potter."

Regulus tried to keep his face steady at the mention of Sirius and, more specifically, Potter.

Isa, still roaring with laughter, wiped her eyes. "You have a *strange* definition of small talk."

Barty shot her a fierce glare. "Well – no worries, they'll find out about our definition of smalltalk soon enough. We couldn't fire back because bloody Head Boy Davies suddenly showed up with McGonagall, but we'll know where to find them."

Regulus noticed Isa tense slightly at the mention of Davies, her fingers tightening around her goblet, but she recovered quickly.

"How Dumbledore made you a Prefect is never going to stop amazing me," she said, a touch of disbelief and amusement in her tone.

Barty threw her a smug smirk. "Jealous, Nott? Don't tell me you weren't at least a little bit surprised when you found out you weren't."

Isa snorted, shaking her head. "If anything, the nitwit did me a favour, Crouch. Have you *seen* my schedule? I barely have time to eat, let alone patrol corridors and deal with first years."

Isa had a point, though – if Regulus were honest, he was fairly certain he'd have been made a Prefect if he hadn't spent the first term in France. Still, even with Regulus unavailable, Evan would've been the more logical choice. He was definitely less impulsive and far less vengeful than Barty. The only plausible explanation was that Mr. Crouch had intervened behind the scenes, steering Dumbledore's decision.

"Is there nothing in your book about undoing these kinds of spells?" Regulus asked, gesturing vaguely toward their bald heads.

Evan shrugged. "We tried, but I think they used some combination of spells – we'll have to see Pomfrey at some point."

Barty let his hand slide over his bare skull, smirking. "Dunno. I think it's starting to grow on me."

Isa snorted. "You two look like thugs."

Evan and Barty exchanged wicked glances, their eyes gleaming with

mischief.

“Precisely,” Evan said with a grin.

Isa rolled her eyes and shot Regulus an annoyed glare, which he answered with an unfazed shrug before he tucked into his food.

He’d long ago stopped trying to understand these two.

*****

Indeed, as expected, the event of turning Evan and Barty bold ignited an all-out appearance-jinxing war in the castle; already on the second day, Sirius and Potter had turned bald, several third-year Ravenclaws had their eyebrows vanished as a result of some stray jinx, and had Barty and Evan been hit by a spell covering them in acne. It was so bad that they had to be treated by Pomfrey, who had – to Barty’s dismay – also insisted on growing their hair back. When during dinner two second-year Slytherins had become collateral damage and turned green, the teachers had apparently had enough of it. Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, Potter, Sirius and that little friend of theirs, Pettigrew, had all been handed detention for the rest of the week.

Another development was the horrendous, awkward thing known as the Slug Club. Regulus had – already before attending Hogwarts even – known that his invitation was inevitable. The Professor had likely been counting down the days until Regulus reached fifth year, eager to extend an invitation the very moment the first of September arrived – Slughorn could hardly miss the opportunity to include Regulus Arcturus Black, one of the castle’s best students and the Heir of the House of Black, in his stupid club.

And indeed, the very first minute of the first Potion class after the holidays, Slughorn had managed to corner Regulus and manipulate him into accepting his invitation. Everything in him wanted to decline – the Slug Club was nothing more than an extension of the excruciating dinners and parties he had to attend outside of the Castle, although now only with the family’s offspring and some stray invites that had managed to impress the Professor beyond their heritage.

Still, although he wanted nothing more than to follow Sirius’s example and boldly decline, Regulus knew the decision had never really been his to make; everyone who had come before him – Cissy, Bellatrix, Andromeda, Lucius and all his friends – had been part of the club. He’d heard Cissy underscoring the club’s importance on so many occasions he could actually mimic her saying it. *“It’s such a good*

opportunity to network, Reggie."

After dinner on Tuesday, though, it wasn't the looming prospect of the horrible dinner later that week that occupied Regulus's mind. Instead, as he changed into his Quidditch kit and grabbed his broom from the dorm, it was the Quidditch training that gave him a very uneasy feeling in his gut.

Now, having practice together in their … particular situation wasn't new; they had been training side by side for months while stepping into the same bed at night. And yet, it felt different; it was different now that they couldn't escape to Beauxbatons and outrun the reality of the sheer impossibility of them. The impossibility of them being together.

They hadn't officially ended things, but Regulus knew they couldn't continue; Regulus had just known that they couldn't proceed. Their rendezvous over the Christmas holidays had been a gift – one he cherished deeply – because in his mind, their last night at Beauxbatons marked the last of *them*.

But *boy*, was it hard to face the truth. To act upon it.

Practice was alright in essence; they were focusing mostly on individual drills and the Keeper, for Durmstrang's strength lay with their Chasers. Sure, they were probably nothing compared to the combination of Potter and the Macmillan sisters, but once the Durmstrang Chaser got hold of the Quaffle, it was also the Hogwarts Keeper, Hedge, that'd be put to work. In that light, they spent half the training on their own drills – Regulus chasing snitches and doing laps – and the other half on simulating plays against Durmstrang and challenging Hedge.

Regulus tried his best to avoid Potter's gaze, but it wasn't easy. Especially when Regulus formed a team of Chasers with the Macmillan sisters – playing against Warlow, Sirius and Potter – he had a hard time not getting distracted by Potter's flawless, marvelous flying and his intense, almost shy gaze.

At one point, Regulus had possession of the Quaffle, darting past Warlow and heading for the goal. Diana Macmillan was in position, ready to receive the pass, but just as Regulus lifted his arm, Potter swooped in, blocking his path.

Regulus rolled his eyes as Potter smirked, hovering inches away, his broom steady. Regulus veered sharply to the right, trying to feint, but

Potter matched him move for move, cutting him off.

“Seriously?” Regulus shot, trying again to break through.

Potter didn’t respond. Instead, he leaned in close as their brooms hovered dangerously near, their faces mere inches apart.

“Such a shame you’re not a Chaser alongside me, Black,” Potter whispered. “I could watch you all fly all day.”

The words sent a shiver down Regulus’s spine, and for one fleeting, maddening second, he faltered – the Quaffle slipped from his grasp, but, just as Potter was to catch it, Regulus snapped back to reality, strengthened his hold onto it and managed to fly away.

Bloody Potter.

*****

They finished practice in the locker room. It was always the same set-up: Potter, standing in the middle of the space, going through all the highlights of the practice animatedly while Sirius stood nearby, the Macmillan sisters laying sprawled lazily on a bench which was very much to Potter’s annoyance, then Warlow and Hedge listening tentatively on another bench and Regulus standing against the wall across from the room – not apart from then but at a distance far enough to feel like a comfortable bystander, observing the antics in the room.

This time was no difference – Potter shared his enthusiasm and his optimism as for the upcoming match in two weeks, Sirius threw a Quaffle at Cora Macmillan to punish her for her uninterested demeanor while lying on the bench, Hedge just kept on nodding while taking in all the information Potter offered and Regulus stood against the wall, one foot against it, arms crossed and his gaze travelling over Potter – slowly, carefully and unabashedly.

It was the only time that Regulus wasn’t just allowed but also *expected* to look at Potter, an opportunity he seized with both hands. Regulus had come to know many versions of Potter – the playful one with his friends, the silent one in contemplation, all the private version that Regulus had grown familiar with; serious and unwavering, kind and loving, and cheerful like a child. Regulus considered himself having a weak spot for all of them, but Captain Potter was a version of Potter Regulus particularly liked because it seemed to combine many of his versions. He talked and moved animatedly, almost dramatically, he

shared assurances and encouragements while not skipping the serious and sometimes bluntly harsh parts. And he was always optimistic and cheerful.

In these settings, Potter never really liked to make direct eye contact with Regulus, something that suited him well because here, slightly at a distance and going more or less unnoticed unless he was directly addressed, he could gawk at Potter shamelessly; his kind, warm and twinkling eyes, his posture in the Quidditch kit, his chaotic hair. *Fuck*, was Potter charming.

“You alright with that, Black?”

Potter forced him back to reality – his question interrupting his train of thought.

Regulus blinked. “What?”

“Could we go over a few strategies? Nothing special – just some things I thought of…”

Regulus arched an eyebrow. He highly doubted that Potter actually wanted to go over a few strategies.

And being alone with Potter in the locker room was very dangerous.

Potter had taken off his padded Quidditch robes, leaving only a tight, tin long-sleeve shirt underneath; the fabric clung to his torso, highlighting every muscle in his arms and chest.

And they’d be alone.

Still, being caught off guard, Regulus couldn’t think of any excuse to get out of it soon enough, so he shrugged.

“Yeah, sure.”

One by one, their teammates exited the locker room to head off to the castle. Sirius shot his brother and Potter a wary look before slowly closing the door behind him.

“So?” Regulus asked, his tone drier than ever. “What innovative strategies did you want to discuss, Captain?”

He remained standing against the wall, taking in the sight of Potter locking the door with a flick of his wand.

Then, Potter strolled over slowly, looked Regulus intensely in his eyes, and went to stand next to him against the wall. They were close — so close that Regulus felt Potter's shoulders against his and felt the warmth radiating from his body.

A tense, heavy silence stretched between them as they stared against the wall across from them.

"How have you been?"

Regulus sighed. They were in dangerous waters now — away from the world, again in a bubble, this time created by Potter's locking spell.

Regulus found himself torn between giving in or going away. He knew he'd better round up the conversation quickly and return to the castle. Staying here, lingering here, with Potter's warm side against his, his voice soft and low…

Regulus took a deep breath.

"I am good. You?"

He knew the words were dismissive, reluctant — but it was the only resistance he could muster. He knew that as much as a soft word or a step closer would make everything falter. And he knew that Potter knew, too.

"I am good," Potter nodded, still looking at the wall across from them, like Regulus.

Another silence stretched between them.

All of a sudden, Regulus felt the soft stroke of a hand against his. His breath hitched at the sensation — it was hardly anything, especially compared to what they'd done, what they'd touched before, yet it felt more intimate than anything.

Instinctively, Regulus laced his fingers through Potter's. His heart jumped into an erratic rhythm at the touch, his throat turning dry.

He felt Potter turning his head and glancing at him. "I miss you, Reg," he whispered.

Regulus flinched. "I am standing right next to you, we're in the same castle…"

He heard Potter sigh. "It's not really the same, is it?"

Regulus now turned his head too, locking gazes with Potter. His expression was a mix of warmth and sadness.

“No, it isn’t,” Regulus breathed.

Without a second thought, without registering the objections in his head, Regulus gently cupped Potter’s face as they closed the distance between them.

Potter’s lips felt familiar yet different — as if he’d kissed them just now and hadn’t tasted them for years at the same time. Regulus felt Potter’s hands at his waist, pulling him closer. When they opened their mouths to welcome each other’s tongues, he felt Potter’s ragged breath against his lips — a sensation igniting every part of his body.

How he wanted him — wanted to kiss him everywhere, take off his clothes, feel his breath all over him.

Regulus groaned, unrestrained and guttural.

But then he suddenly realised where he was — the Hogwarts locker room, nearby the castle filled with people that couldn’t, mustn’t know about this — and he realised what he was doing — kissing James Potter, pressing him against the wall, hard and aching, reeling.

So he pulled back.

“James,” he breathed, breathing against Potter’s lips, foreheads touching. “We — we have to stop doing this.”

Potter’s hand slid up to cradle Regulus’s head and pushed him closer. He quickly kissed him again — a sloppy, hurried kiss with a lot of breath and tongue. “Why?” he whispered against his lips.

Although he knew he shouldn’t, knew he had to break away, Regulus couldn’t resist the temptation, the sensation of Potter against him. He let his tongue slide over Potter’s lip before it found its way back in. Then, he pulled back.

“You know why,” Regulus whispered.

Potter looked at him, his eyes filled with desire. “No, I don’t,” he said, his voice hoarse before kissing him again.

Regulus felt himself burning with desire, with arousal, as he felt Potter’s hips against his and his hand low on his waist.

Still, reality and sense kicked in between kisses, and Regulus managed to pull back. He cupped Potter's face and they were still so close that they could feel each other's fast and shallow breaths on their skins.

"James," Regulus croaked, his voice almost desperate. "We're going to destroy ourselves."

Potter stiffened and pulled back further.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Regulus sighed and returned to stand against the wall, his sides grazing Potter's.

They looked sideways at each other, their postures mirroring each other perfectly.

"You know we have no future. The longer we let this go on, the more we do, the harder it'll get…"

Potter's expression turned into a mix of wryness and sadness.

"I — I know," he croaked.

Regulus arched an eyebrow at Potter's troubled face and watery eyes.

No, he *really* couldn't deal with tears; not here, not now, not over this.

"James," Regulus started dryly, attempting to lighten the mood, "are you going to cry?"

Potter shook his head firmly, although he didn't look at Regulus and his eyes looked clearly wet.

"What if we don't focus on the future, though," Potter managed after a silence. "What if we… focus on now. We *know* we can't… I don't know… end up together… but we don't have to focus on the future now, do we?"

Regulus shot him a wary gaze.

"You're turning of age soon," he said. "I don't think we… can get around focusing on the future."

He purposely didn't add the much more important reason forcing them to focus on the future – the revolution that was undoubtedly

going to start in a matter of months.

And Regulus knew it, felt it.

With the modernists not giving way for the demands of traditionalists, and both sides building armies, there was only one outcome.

War.

And Regulus and Potter – the sides they were going to fight on, well, they were set in stone.

How could they continue this, how could they deepen this, expand this, knowing that, at the end of the day, they'd be fighting each other?

"We can't, James," Regulus croaked. "There is just no way… If we continue this, it'll only be harder when we're … forced to move away from each other."

He pointedly ignored the lump in his throat.

Potter looked at Regulus firmly. "Won't it be worth it, Reg?"

Regulus flinched.

"I don't know, James. I honestly don't know."

*****

The rest of the week passed by swiftly – Regulus had managed to avoid Potter most of the time. It was a strange situation; they had never *had* anything to end, so he hadn't really *ended* anything, but there was a shift, something different, implying something *had* ended, but not entirely, because he couldn't resist it when Potter had cornered him after practice – leaving them snogging for at least an hour before he'd returned to the castle, feeling a very strange mix of delighted and guilt-ridden at the same time. He knew he had to be the prudent one, the bigger person, the one to set his foot down and end whatever the hell it was that they'd been doing for months, but somehow, once he found himself alone in the room with Potter, all his defences crumbled and he just couldn't – *couldn't* resist.

Another development keeping Regulus occupied was the ongoing war between Slytherin and Gryffindor – since nearly all of his friends and Potter's friends were serving detention for the remainder of the week

and all the teachers kept their eyes set on them, it had been toned down a bit; but still, once there were no teachers around, they continued their stupid, childish games and it was basically all his friends talked about over meals or in the common room.

When Regulus stepped into the common room freshly showered after practice on Thursday, with – despite the deep cleaning and rinsing under the icy cold water – still tasting Potter on his lips, the 'war' was, indeed, still all they talked about.

"Alright, so I say we change tactics," Avery suggested, his voice conspiratorial. "Strike when they least expect it."

"You still not over this stupid jinx war?" Regulus yawned, collapsing onto the sofa beside Mulciber and Avery. Across from them, Barty and Evan were sprawled out, exchanging ideas like generals at war. "Where's Severus?" Regulus asked, noticing his absence.

"Library," Mulciber replied.

Barty raised an eyebrow. "Surely not with that Mudblood?"

Avery shook his head. "Don't think so – I don't think they're… friends anymore."

This caught Regulus's attention. He'd never understood the relationship between Severus – so intelligent, his ideology clearly in line with the revolution – and the Gryffindor Mudblood. Regulus couldn't really care for her or the fact that Severus clearly had some kind of romantic involvement with a Mudblood – but the rest of the world *did* care about it, so it was rather bold for him to associate with her. Or to have done so – apparently.

"Snape finally came to his senses?" Evan asked.

"Not exactly," Avery said cautiously. "From what I've heard, it was mostly on her request."

Barty's mouth fell open. "The Mudblood dumped him?"

"They were never a thing, Crouch," Mulciber said. "Only friends."

"Oh, sure," Evan said dryly. "A bit like our Black and Nott here."

Regulus sighed in irritation. "I'm getting sick of defending this."

"Good that he's rid of her, though," Barty said, ignoring him. "She's a

real bloody pain in the arse. The bitch ratted us all out to Dumbledore."

Avery nodded. "Yeah. Thanks to her, we're stuck in detention for the whole bloody week."

Suddenly, Barty clapped his hands together, his expression lighting up like fireworks. "I've got it. Let's go after her."

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "What?"

The others, equally puzzled, leaned forward.

Barty's grin widened. "Let's target her. Rattle her a bit. Spook her so she won't rat us out again."

The room buzzed with murmurs of agreement.

Regulus, however, frowned. "You think Severus will be okay with that?"

Mulciber waved a hand dismissively. "Severus doesn't know half of what's going on. And when he does, he doesn't understand."

"Yeah," Avery added. "She's had him wrapped around her finger for years. It's pathetic."

"Alright, so what do we do?" Evan asked, intrigued.

"Acne? Her hair?" Mulciber suggested with a wicked grin, clearly hinting at her red hair.

Barty shook his head dramatically, pacing the space around the sofas with exaggerated flair. Then he froze, his expression triumphant.

"Let's go for the boobs."

Mulciber and Avery burst into laughter. Evan, on the other hand, looked confused. "What does that mean?"

"We'll corner her," Barty explained eagerly. "Inflate her boobs, maybe give her some acne — something humiliating. Nothing hurts a girl more than vanity."

Regulus stared at him, appalled. "Crouch, are you serious?"

"Yes!" Barty replied, his grin unwavering. "It doesn't get more

humiliating than this, right?"

Mulciber smirked. "Let's draw 'Mudblood' on her forehead while we're at it."

Barty clapped his hands together again. "Perfect! We'll corner her on her way back from Slughorn's New Year's reception. Our detentions will be done by then, and she'll never see it coming."

The group dissolved into laughter and cheers, slapping each other on the back as if they'd just won a Quidditch match.

Regulus, however, didn't join in. It was a cheap, low joke – ambushing a girl, four against one, and targeting her body.

He was torn between holding back, letting this stupid war unfold between all of them without him partaking, and using his newly gained influential position to try to steer this into another direction – ever since they'd found out he was in direct contact with the Dark Lord and taking part in missions, the group dynamics had shifted. It was subtle, but Regulus felt it; how they all looked at him when they discussed the news, how they showed off their newly mastered spells and knowledge as if they awaited his praise. So perhaps they'd take his words into consideration if he were to raise objections…

Still, even if he wanted to stop it, though, would it be enough? It *was* four against one, he had no reason to defend the Mudblood, and she *had* brought it upon herself by meddling and ratting them out.

He sighed and let his friends' laughter echo around him as he took his book and started reading.

*****

The much dreaded Slug Club New Year's Reception the next day turned out to be rather entertaining; although, Regulus had to admit, the entertainment came from a very unexpected source.

Fate had it that somehow nearly *all* his friends were invited to the party – Isa, Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery were all expected to go – but Regulus found himself preparing to go alone.

"Can't believe you're bloody ditching me," Regulus hissed at Isa.

He stood in front of the mirror in his dorm, fiddling with the *ridiculous* bow on his festive robes. His sharp glare was reflected in the glass. Isa,

entirely unfazed, sprawled across his bed with an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

“You know you’re not obliged to go either, right?” she said dryly, punching Regulus’s pillow so it’d be more comfortable to lie on.

Regulus sighed heavily. “I gave the man my word. And he said something about an interesting guest.”

Isa snorted. “Yes, well, that’s what he says every time.”

Regulus turned, falling to one knee in a dramatic flourish.

“Isa, my dear, beloved, Isadora Elowyn Nott, will you please – *please* — come with me? *Please* save me from enduring this hell alone.”

Before Isa could retort, the dormitory door swung open, and in walked Barty and Evan. Regulus groaned at their impeccable timing.

“Ah, finally,” Barty said with a wicked grin, leaning against the wall nonchalantly. “The proposal.”

“Always knew we’d witness this moment,” Evan added, smirking.

Isa burst into laughter and hurled a pillow at them. “No proposal, nitwits — just a pathetic attempt to drag me to Slughorn’s party.”

Regulus rose to his feet.

“There was no way you two could get out of detention tonight?” he snapped. “I’m sure if you’d asked Slughorn—”

“McGonagall won’t be having it, Black,” Barty interrupted. “Believe me, I’d much rather get plastered in Slughorn’s office than scrub bloody trophies with your brother, Potter, and their stupid friend.”

Regulus groaned, pocketing his wand with a sharp motion.

“Why aren’t you going, Nott?” Evan asked, his brow furrowed.

Isa rolled her eyes.

“No thanks. Those parties are stiff and boring, and I’ve got inches of parchment to write before the weekend’s over.”

Regulus didn’t look her way as he tied his shoelaces, knowing the real reason why she wasn’t going – Head Boy Davies who would, without a

doubt, be present and remind her of her heartache or whatever it was she was suffering from.

As he stood, Isa pushed herself off the bed and flicked her wand. With a few quick gestures, she adjusted the ridiculous bow on his robes, smoothing down the fabric with exaggerated care. She smirked as she stepped back, meeting his gaze.

“Wouldn’t want you to embarrass the noble house of Black,” she quipped.

She didn’t even have to turn around to know about Barty’s suggestive expression – waggling his eyebrows with a wicked grin.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Crouch.”

Evan, grinning, elbowed Barty. “The day will come, mate, when we’re witnessing the actual proposal.”

Regulus rolled his eyes and grabbed his wand. “Don’t you two have trophies to scrub?”

“Ha ha,” Barty shot back.

As Regulus made his way to the door, Evan called out after him. “Give Sluggy a kiss from us!”

“And say hi to the Selwyns!” Barty added.

Regulus froze in the doorway, turning to face them with a horrified expression.

No.

“The Selwyns are invited? I thought Slughorn only invited *talented* people.”

Isa shrugged. “Or powerful ones. You know their dad…”

“You bloody traitors,” Regulus hissed, shaking his head as he exited the room.

All his friends in detention, yet the *Selwyns* would be there.

Great.

*****

Regulus entered Slughorn's office on the sixth floor feeling rather awkward — he had no idea who had been invited and had no idea what a New Year's Reception in a Professor's office looked like. It was after dinner, so he supposed there would be no food – but when he pushed open the door and saw a large dining table, laden with an assortment of platters, silver goblets and flickering candles, he figured he might've misunderstood.

Regulus cautiously hovered at the entrance while taking in the sight of the unrecognisable room.

The sheer enthusiasm of his Head of House at seeing him didn't really temper his awkwardness – if anything, it only fuelled it.

"Oh, Regulus, my boy!" Slughorn's booming voice carried across the room. The man's walrus-like mustache twitched with delight as he hurried over, his velvet waistcoat straining slightly as he leaned forward to clap Regulus on both shoulders.

"How splendid of you to join us — splendid! I was *just* telling some students about your *extraordinary* potion work in my O.W.L. class — simply flawless technique, dear boy. *Flawless*! Why, I daresay you could give some of the Ministry's Potioneers a run for their Galleons."

Regulus shifted very uncomfortably, his hand brushing against the doorframe, very much illustrating his contemplation of an escape.

"Err – thank you, sir," he answered.

He truly hoped it'd stop there, but then Slughorn gave him a jovial pat on the back with such force that it sent him stumbling forward, inadvertently stepping into the room.

"Yes, yes!" Slughorn continued, entirely oblivious to Regulus's discomfort. "And, of course, there's the matter of Quidditch! I was *delighted* to hear you'd made the team — oh, we'll finally see you perform in two weeks, won't we? And your brother! Such a shame he never came to one of my little gatherings — an *exquisite* Beater, of course, but no sense of occasion, alas."

Regulus shot him a polite nod, carefully sidestepping what he suspected was another incoming hearty clap on the shoulder and then stepped fully into the room.

He groaned inwardly at the turnout.

Everyone was still in that awkward phase of social gatherings where dinner wasn't yet served, leaving them hovering awkwardly; people either didn't know each other well enough to form natural conversations or just didn't care, so everyone was painfully dependent on the host to give life to the party – and with Slughorn being occupied by his exuberant welcomes every other minute, Regulus could've sworn he tasted the awkwardness in the air.

Oblivious to gossip and generally uninterested in people outside his circle, Regulus surveyed the attendees. He, naturally, recognised the Selwyns, standing at the far end of the room with identical expressions of disdain, whispering conspiratorially. He also recognised the previous Slytherin Quidditch Captain, Lucinda Talkalot, who was making small talk with Claire Silvermire, last year's Chaser.

Regulus's gaze swept over the rest of the room: two Hufflepuffs he didn't recognise, a seventh-year Ravenclaw deep in conversation with Davies, and two Gryffindors — one he vaguely remembered as Jorkins, the other being Severus's Mudblood friend.

Having to mingle in this crowd – the poisonous Selwyns, Isa's ex-boyfriend and Severus's Mudblood friend who'd become part of some stupid prank in a matter of hours – all while his friends had ditched him thanks to their bloody detention — *what* a bloody misery.

Groaning, he made a beeline for the beverages table to avoid Slughorn's praise escalating into a full-blown serenade, when the Professor's voice boomed again.

"Such a shame we're so few tonight! A couple of students caught in detention, I'm afraid. But we do have two special guests joining us later this evening, so we'll start dinner once they've arrived. Until then, my dear friends — socialise!"

Regulus winced at the idea of forced socialisation. He loitered by the drinks, attempting to blend into the background, but Slughorn soon spotted him and waved him over to join the Ravenclaws enthusiastically.

"Ah, Regulus! Have you met Head Boy Davies here? And of course, this is Mr. Eddington — as brilliant as his friend!"

Regulus exchanged stiff nods with the two blokes, his eyes resting on Davies a tad longer than he'd intended. He looked tired, his green eyes shadowed by dark circles. His posture was stiff and cold as he locked gazes with Regulus.

Then, as if matters couldn't get worse, Slughorn suddenly pulled the seventh-year Gryffindor, Jorkins, into their circle, only to whisk Eddington away moments later to introduce him to someone else.

Regulus's eyes flicked between Davies and Jorkins, the silence stretching uncomfortably.

"So," Jorkins said eventually, her voice brimming with misplaced enthusiasm, "you're Isadora Nott's boyfriend?"

Oh, what an *awful* start in the current company. Not even a bloody *hello* before throwing the topic of Isadora Nott at her ex-boyfriend and the latter's presumed competition.

Regulus somehow managed to hold his composure and merely blinked, his expression flat.

"No. We're just friends," he replied curtly, wondering why he didn't simply ignore her – he didn't owe her an explanation. He realised then that he was perhaps talking more to Davies than Jorkins.

"Oh, well," she pressed, undeterred, "*I* heard you've been spending all the holidays together. Didn't you stay with her in Damascus over the summer holidays?"

Regulus scratched the back of his head, ignoring Davies's darkening expression. "Er – yes – I suppose."

"And didn't you attend your cousin Narcissa Malfoy's wedding together? *As a couple?* I saw the rehearsal photos."

His discomfort grew, and he didn't know what was more alarming – the growing hostile glares from Davies or the realisation that this daft, nosy seventh-year Gryffindor knew entirely too much about him whereas he didn't even know her first name.

What the fuck.

"Er—yes, but just—"

"And," Jorkins continued triumphantly, "I heard you spent Christmas together too—"

"How the hell do you know these things?" Regulus blurted all of a sudden, alarmed.

Jorkins clapped her hands, victorious. "*Hah!* I wasn't sure about the

last one, but now I know for sure!"

Before he could muster a reply, Slughorn called her away, leaving Regulus and Davies staring at each other in awkward silence. Davies's gaze was clearly annoyed and cold, but Regulus shrugged it off with an icy glare of his own – he knew he shouldn't even care about the bloke; he was Isa's ex for a reason and it wasn't like Regulus was actually dating her.

Then, Davies glanced over his shoulder – undoubtedly ensuring no one was eavesdropping – and leaned closer.

"How is she doing?"

Regulus raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"You do realise you live in the same castle, don't you? Why don't you ask her yourself?"

Davies's attempt at a hard, stony glare faltered as emotion seeped through. "She doesn't want… any contact. Says it's better this way."

Regulus nodded stiffly. "She's alright. You know… she's tough."

Davies gave a wry smile. "Yeah. I know."

A silence hung between them before Davies, visibly struggling, finally spoke. "Will you… look after her? I'll graduate in a couple of months, and after that… I won't see her anymore."

Regulus sighed, a mix of irritation and pity welling within him.

"I've *always* looked after her, Davies. Long before you came into the picture."

A flicker of emotion crossed Davies's face, but he quickly masked it, nodding once before stepping back.

Then, if being forced to talk to Isa's ex-boyfriend and the one girl in the castle who apparently kept the gossip mill running wasn't enough, Slughorn swooped in once more. This time, he pulled Regulus toward yet another dreaded encounter — Severus's Mudblood friend.

Regulus flinched.

"Ah, here we are!" Slughorn declared, his booming voice cutting through the hum of conversations. "Regulus, allow me to introduce

you to one of the *most brilliant* students I've *ever* had in Potions — Miss Lily Evans!"

Regulus turned to face her. She was, in essence, pretty – long, fiery red hair and striking green eyes. Her expression, though, was cold as ice and her stiff posture and crossed arms spoke volumes about how thrilled she was by this introduction.

If her body language wasn't enough, the sharp glint in her eyes proved that she was as interested in meeting him as he was in meeting her.

"And that," Slughorn added, leaning toward Regulus conspiratorially, "with her background! Remarkable, truly!"

Regulus didn't miss how her expression grew colder at those words, her lips pressing into a thin line.

"And this," Slughorn continued, completely oblivious to the tension, "is Regulus Black! I'm sure you've heard of him — his Potions work is every bit as exemplary as yours, Miss Evans! And, of course, you're in the same house as his brother, Sirius!"

Evans's mouth quirked slightly at that.

"Ah, yes, I know his brother, of course," she said coolly. "Can't say I particularly like him, though."

Regulus raised an eyebrow at the boldness of the Mudblood saying this in the company of both Slughorn and himself. The corners of his mouth twitch upward.

"Seems like we have something in common. I don't like him either."

Evans blinked, clearly caught off guard by his remark. She snorted in humour, the faintest trace of a smile breaking through.

Regulus allowed himself a slight smirk.

Evans's tone shifted slightly as she continued. "Though, if we're talking about unbearable people, your brother has nothing on his best friend, James Potter."

Regulus's brow arched higher. It was… refreshing to hear a negative perspective on Potter from someone who wasn't bound by politics or loyalty to Regulus himself. No, this was a Mudblood, one of the so-called 'marginalised groups' the Potters prided themselves on

championing, and yet here she was, pointing out how unbearable she found him.

Regulus couldn't suppress the burst of laughter coming out of his mouth at the irony.

"So, Potter's charm doesn't work on *everyone,* then?"

Evans smirked. "I'm sure it works on people as shallow as he is. Unfortunately for him, I have better taste."

Regulus laughed again, unable to help himself. He had to admit — the Mudblood was sharp. Witty, even.

Before their conversation could continue, Slughorn's voice rang out once more.

"Alright, everyone! If you'd be so kind as to take your seats at the table, we'll begin shortly!"

Evans gave Regulus one last look, her lips quirking in faint amusement, before turning toward the dining table. Regulus, still caught off guard by the interaction, followed and made his way to the other side of the table.

So there *was* something to the Mudblood, after all.

The table was laden with delicious food, yet the atmosphere remained stiflingly awkward. Regulus was flanked by a Hufflepuff and Jorkins, and across from him sat Davies, Eddington and the Mudblood. All of the students shuffled into their seats, some nervously glancing at one another while others avoided eye contact entirely.

It was so awkward that Regulus seriously questioned why Slughorn even bothered with these stupid parties.

His thoughts were cut short when, with great theatricality, the doors to the office swung open, and two men entered the room.

"Ah, our esteemed guests have arrived!" Slughorn announced, clapping his hands together. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Mr. Octavius Bramble, renowned historian and author of several seminal works on wizarding history!"

Polite applause filled the room as Bramble stepped forward – a tall, austere man with graying hair slicked neatly back. Regulus naturally

knew him; he'd seen him on several occasions, the most recent being the Christmas ball at Dreadmoor Keep. Bramble had even contributed to the Pure-blood Directory, written by Isa's grandfather – basically a list of the 'sacred twenty-eight' British pure-blood families.

His contribution to the directory and his many other books on traditionalism, made the choice to invite him to a dinner party in the current political climate a very bold one.

Regulus's eyes scanned the room, noting the flicker of recognition across the Selwyns's eyes. The rest of the students seemed unfazed by Bramble's presence – barring Evans. She was glaring at Bramble with an intensity suggesting she knew *exactly* who he was.

Regulus smirked. If the girl was really as bold as she'd just portrayed, this was going to be fun.

"And alongside him," Slughorn interrupted Regulus's thoughts, "we have Mr. Barnaby Clink, a celebrated children's author and master of magical fairytales!"

A round-faced man with twinkling eyes and an unkempt mop of hair stepped forward, waving cheerily.

Evans let out a sharp laugh. "Ah, not that much different from Mr. Bramble, then."

Regulus choked on his drink, coughing violently as laughter burst from him. He hastily wiped his mouth with a napkin, shooting Evans a look of incredulous amusement.

The girl *was* bold, he'd give her that.

The reactions around the table were a mix, some laughing nervously and others sitting in stunned silence; Selwyn, predictably, looked thoroughly confused as she was trying to solve the riddle Evans had thrown upon them.

Bramble, his expression carefully neutral, cleared his throat. "Well," he began, his tone crisp, "my work is rather different, Miss…?"

"Evans," she replied flatly, her posture rigid.

"Yes, Miss Evans. I focus on preserving and chronicling the traditions and achievements of wizarding society — ensuring our heritage is remembered as it ought to be."

“And Slytherin, too!” Slughorn chimed in jovially. “A proud alumnus!”

Regulus glanced at Evans just in time to catch her mouthing ‘*Such a surprise’*. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

There was something absurdly funny about a sharp-tongued, fiery Mudblood sitting only a few feet away from Bramble, with Slughorn being completely oblivious to the tense situation.

As the conversation evolved, Regulus mostly tuned it out and ate in silence, observing the people around him. Bramble had started a very boring, self-important monologue about his latest work – a sensation shared by nearly all the students, as no one said anything, except for Selwyn. It was, though, very clear that she had no idea what Bramble was talking about when she proudly declared that she thought Bramble’s book about wandlore was ‘quite brave’.

Regulus caught Evan’s eye – they shared a fleeting glance and quickly bit back their laughter, both barely holding it together.

A while later, it was Clink’s turn to tell about his career, practically radiating with enthusiasm.

“I do performances based on my stories — real immersive shows, with actors and magical effects; everything from reenactments of famous duels to whimsical tales for children. And clowns! I’ve played a clown for years, but I think I’m done now – time to try something new.”

Regulus took a last bite, completely uninterested by the current conversation as he saw Evans turning slowly to Bramble. Her expression remained perfectly composed, and then she said, in a tone so serious it could have been genuine: “Ah, clowns. Have you ever considered joining the team, Mr. Bramble?”

The table fell silent, stunned.

Slughorn was quick to recover and let out a nervous laugh. “Oh, Miss Evans, always full of humour! A sharp wit, indeed!”

But Regulus couldn’t hold back this time – he let out a bark of laughter, doubling over slightly as the absurdity of it all hit him.

Priceless. Absolutely priceless.

Unfortunately, the rest of the dinner passed without incident; the students finished their food making small talk with the two writers or

with each other, and the Mudblood was too engrossed in her conversation with Davies to send the table into another round of entertainment.

When dinner was over, they were all forced into yet another excruciating series of socialisation. Regulus avoided it as best he could by inconspicuously hovering near the end of the room, sipping from his Butterbeer, and trying to remain invisible.

Just another hour or so, and this whole ordeal would be over.

His gaze landed on Sylas Selwyn and Eddington, both listening attentively to Bramble, who was undoubtedly talking about himself and his work.

“Shouldn’t you go over there and befriend the Death Eater historian?”

Regulus snapped his head sideways, startled. The Mudblood stood beside him, arms crossed, her expression sharp and determined. Clearly, she was on a warpath.

Regulus smirked. “Oh, I’ve known Bramble for a long time, so no need.”

Evans looked taken aback but recovered quickly. “Sure you have.”

Regulus let his gaze travel over her slowly, watching as she glanced toward Bramble with thinly veiled disdain.

“You’re bold,” he suddenly blurted out — the words escaping him before he could process what he was doing. He wasn’t the sort to socialise with a Mudblood, especially not during a bloody New Year’s Reception, and yet here he was.

“What?” Evans asked, her brows furrowing in confusion.

Regulus rolled his eyes, deciding to just go with it. “You’re bold,” he repeated. “You should be careful with your mouth.”

Her eyebrows shot up, her expression instantly challenging. “Excuse me?”

He sighed, wondering why he had to spell it out for her. “You should be careful with provoking… certain people.”

She stared at him, her defiance unwavering, as though daring him to elaborate.

Sure, the Mudbloods and blood traitors were still more or less protected by Minchum and the modernists in politics – but it'd be a matter of time before the Ministry fell and then there would be no security anymore; and the enemies one made now that they were still restrained, would come back with twice the force once the restraints were lifted.

Yes, Regulus was sure that Bramble wasn't a Death Eater, but he was influential in dangerous circles.

Evans was still utterly unfazed.

"You really think I'm going to shut my mouth when I'm being sat at a table with some — what? Traditionalist? Terrorist? Death Eater sympathiser who thinks a witch with my background is worth less than the dirt under his shoes?"

Regulus tilted his head, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Why bother attending these parties, anyway? Most of the people here are Slytherins – the rest are nearly all purebloods from powerful families. And you know the kind of guests Slughorn likes to invite…"

Her defiance flickered into something softer for a moment. "Professor Slughorn really appreciates it when I come," she admitted, before falling silent, her gaze turning distant.

A realisation dawned on Regulus, and he raised an eyebrow. "And you want to prove people wrong?"

Evans blinked, caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged, watching her reaction closely.

"Conquering your seat at the table, despite being a—" He caught himself, swallowing the word 'Mudblood'. "Muggleborn?"

Her expression darkened instantly. A fierce glare shot his way, her lips curling in anger.

"Don't you dare judge me, Black," she snapped, her voice low and biting. "I wasn't born into privilege like you. I've had to fight for everything I have, every opportunity, every scrap of recognition. And yet here I am. Skilled, intelligent, capable — everything they claim to value."

Regulus's face remained outwardly impassive, but her words struck a chord somewhere deep within him. He felt pity – pity for her naivety.

Thinking that skill and intelligence could conquer the world, as if lineage and connections didn't matter, as if talent alone could outweigh centuries of ingrained power structures.

So sharp, yet *so* naive.

He didn't answer, letting the silence stretch between them as they both looked toward the group of students gathered around Bramble in the distance.

And then, a realisation struck him — the prank.

Barty, Evan, Mulciber, and Avery would be waiting for her near the staircase to the seventh floor. They'd ambush her, scrawl slurs on her face, and inflate her boobs as part of their ridiculous sense of humour.

If he had been rational, he would have let it slide. The Mudblood was no one to him, while his friends… well, they were his friends. And in a way, it might serve her — maybe she'd take his advice seriously about keeping her head down.

His next move, however, was anything but rational. She had amused him tonight, with her boldness and sharp tongue at dinner, and deep down, he knew Severus wouldn't like the prank at all.

"Take a detour to the Gryffindor Tower," he blurted out, startling himself as much as her.

Evans turned to him, eyes narrowing in surprise. "What?"

Regulus sighed deeply, masking his discomfort with irritation. "I said – take a detour to the Gryffindor Tower."

Her suspicion only deepened. "*Why*?"

He rolled his eyes, frustration creeping into his tone. "Doesn't matter why — just make sure to take a detour. Or ensure you're with…" He paused, calculating quickly. "…at least six people."

Evans stared at him, her gaze sharp and probing. Then she scoffed, a disbelieving sound. "Yeah, sure."

Regulus's eyebrows shot up at her dismissiveness. "Gotta be careful, Evans," he said, his voice tinged with exasperation. "Roaming the

hallways alone."

Her eyes flashed. "Is that a threat, Black?"

Regulus blinked, caught off guard by the question. "What? *No*." His irritation flared. "Bloody hell."

What the hell – he was betraying his own *friends* and yet she didn't even believe him. And here he thought she was sharp.

Before either of them could say another word, the door burst open.

Professor McGonagall strode in, her expression sharp as steel, with Evan, Barty, Mulciber, and Avery trailing behind her, all looking varying degrees of angry and sullen.

"Horace," McGonagall said, her clipped voice carrying across the room. "I found your students hovering at the staircase to the seventh floor — a rather strange place to be loitering at this hour, wouldn't you agree?"

Slughorn blinked, clearly flustered. "Ah, yes, yes. Very strange indeed. Boys, what were you thinking?"

Evans slowly turned her face to Regulus, her expression shifting as comprehension dawned. Regulus's gaze however, remained at the Professors and his friends in the distance. He looked at her from the corner of his eyes.

"They were going to ambush me?" she whispered.

Regulus didn't answer, but his slightly raised eyebrows were enough of an answer.

Evans's brows furrowed, confusion clouding her features. "And you tried to… warn me?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, setting his Butterbeer down on the table beside him. Then, with a lazy push off the wall, he straightened, fixing her with a pointed look.

"Not a word, Evans," he said, his tone firm and final.

He turned on his heel and walked toward his friends, now caught in an awkward discussion with the two professors.

And little did he know, as he ignored Evans's baffled expression, as he

made his way across the room, as he sighed inwardly and wished for this evening to end — little did he know that this interaction would, years later, save his life.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you've enjoyed this chapter. I'm looking forward to the next chapters because ... the plot will thicken ;)

Chapter 17: Of Matches & Encounters

Chapter Notes

> I know I've given out the warnings with the prologue, but alas;
> TW: mature content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two weeks leading up to Hogwarts' first match, Quidditch was all the castle seemed to talk about. Although the frenzy went hand in hand with a rare and welcome lull in the Slytherin-Gryffindor jinx-war, it was driving Regulus crazy. He could barely join a meal in the Great Hall without all his friends erupting into cheers and applause as a form of welcoming 'this generation finest Seeker', as Barty had taken to calling him.

On top of that, and worse even, Barty and Evan had secretly produced a stash of badges emblasoned with his face and the truly horrid slogan, *No Flop with Black on Top!*, flashing in colour-shifting hues. Regulus wished to die on the spot every time he saw people wearing the badges, and he didn't know what was more alarming – the growing group of people voluntarily wearing them or the fact that Barty and Evan seemed to actually believe the badges to be a healthy expression of support.

He knew the entire team was suffering from it – the pressure, the lack of free time due to their intense training schedule. They had practice every day and Potter had actually reached out to McGonagall to help ward off students from the pitch; with excitement growing, several students had snuck onto the pitch to watch practice and it had led to some confrontations with the team. The only ones that seemed genuinely unfazed by the circus were the Macmillan sisters; the rest of the team definitely felt the strain.

Regulus knew that Sirius pretended to be unbothered, but his temper had grown very short; it took rather little for him to snap at everyone and everything closeby, and the level of coldness from his eyes when Regulus found him too close in the same room had reached a peak level.

Potter, of course, was the worst; he had them training for hours on end, obsessively analysing everyone's every move after practice and he looked perpetually sleep-deprived. Potter's complete dedication to

the game even resulted in less rendezvous with Regulus – they could hardly come up with an excuse for lingering in the locker room every practice. The few times that they had managed to get rid off their teammates, though, Potter's antics and movements had been hurried, desperate and sloppy – sloppy kisses, unsteady fingers as he unzipped Regulus's pants and only able to shut up with Regulus's lips on his or other parts of his body.

So, with that in mind, Regulus felt a small sense of relief when he woke up on the morning of the match, knowing that at least it would be over after that day – sure, he was also wracked with nerves, but he tried to focus on the tiny part of relief that'd come at the end of the day.

Although he, as usual, woke up early, all his friends woke up with him and accompanied him to the Great Hall. The gesture would've moved him if it weren't for the fact that he was very much distracted by the nerves *and* utterly mortified by the antics of the Hogwarts student body whenever a player entered the Great Hall – because the moment any player entered the Hall, the entire room erupted into applause. Regardless of which House the player of the supporters belonged to, the students cheered and whistled, their ovations loud and unabashed.

It was then that Regulus realised, with a mix of exasperation and grudging admiration, that this ridiculous unity project was actually working – granted, it would last for a day at most, by the next day, the old rivalries would reassert themselves – but one day without Gryffindors and Slytherins jinxing each other and with all the Houses clapping for students together, well, that was monumental.

He shuffled awkwardly toward the Slytherin table, hyper aware of the sheer number of excited eyes on him. As he walked, his gaze flickered toward the Gryffindor table. There, in the middle of a sea of students fussing over them, were Sirius and Potter. To Regulus's surprise, both of them were clapping – Sirius rather reluctantly, contrary to Potter who clapped with a smirk so cheeky it could have lit up the room. When he caught Potter's eye, he winked, a gesture answered by an exaggerated eye-roll from Regulus, who pointedly ignored the curious eyes of the werewolf boring into him.

The horrible attention didn't stop there; no, during breakfast, all the Hogwarts' players were bombarded with jovial claps, cheers and wishes for success by other students. Regulus tried his best to tune out the buzz and excitement, as it only fuelled the nerves knotted in his

stomach, and instead focused on getting some food into his system, although his mouth was dry and his head foggy and he was anything but hungry.

When Warlow and Hedge entered the Great Hall and headed towards the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables respectively, Regulus politely joined the applause that erupted around the Hall.

He was still poking his eggs when he noticed the eyes of the majority of the students in the hall travelling to Potter, who had risen from his seat and made his way to Warlow at the Hufflepuff table. They exchanged a few words before Potter did the same with Hedge at the Ravenclaw table.

As to be expected, he then continued his way to the Slytherin table — a tad less confidently, though that would've gone past most people.

Regulus felt Evan and Barty stiffen next to him and saw Mulciber and Avery exchanging a glance before their hands shifted subtly toward their wands. Potter seemed completely unfazed by the hostility and eyed the wands with mild amusement, sauntering closer with his hands in his pockets. He jerked his head when he locked gazes with Regulus, motioning for him to come over.

Regulus nodded stiffly and rose from his seat, feeling the many eyes — most prominently those from his friends — burning in his back.

Potter leaned in slightly, his voice low.

"Alright — apparently Dumbledore wants to say a few words. After that we'll go with our Heads of House, and then it's straight to the pitch for warm-up laps."

Regulus nodded. "Got it."

Potter's gaze lingered on him for a moment, his smirk softening into that signature kind and genuine expression. "You need to eat," he added, tilting his head toward Regulus's untouched plate.

Regulus raised an eyebrow, his tone dry. "Have you eaten?"

Potter's lips twitched into a wry smile. "Nah. Still working on it."

Regulus couldn't help a small snort. "Nervous?"

"Dying," Potter said with a small smile.

Regulus met his eyes steadily, pointedly ignoring the unease of so many people watching the exchange between him and Potter – to the students, just the Captain and the Seeker, but to themselves so much more.

"We're going to be great, Potter. *You're* going to be great."

For a brief moment, a flicker of warmth crossed Potter's eyes as his face broke into a small smile. He composed himself quickly, though, and without another word, they parted ways, each returning to their tables.

"What was that about?" Evan asked curiously.

Regulus shrugged and didn't meet his eyes, instead focusing on the very unappealing eggs on his plate. "Just an update on when to get to the pitch."

When he reached for his goblet of pumpkin juice, he accidentally locked eyes with Isa. She sat across from him and slightly to the left, and it didn't go past him that her eyes – void of emotion – lingered on him just a moment too long, sending a ripple of unease through him. Regulus quickly looked away and returned his attention to his food, though his heart raced in response to her unnerving stare.

*****

The hour leading up to the match passed in a hazy, surreal blur. Dumbledore had indeed delivered a few words of encouragement and celebration to the Great Hall before the players were ushered into the antechamber by their Heads of House – there, they were subjected to another nerve-wracking pep talk and a detailed explanation of their entrance onto the pitch.

Regulus very pointedly did *not* look in Potter's direction in that room, for the last time he had been there was during the Unity Ball, when he had pinned Potter against the wall and snogged him so desperately he could physically feel the sensation on his lips just thinking about it and about the words preached by Potter when they'd broken apart.

Fuck Black – you're killing me.

Regulus hated to be surrounded by people before a match. He'd normally eat in the Kitchens or not eat at all, depending on how bad the nerves were, and then join the Slytherin team on the pitch. This time, however, his friends had miraculously woken up with him and

had practically forced him to join them at the table – if he'd known about the spectacle he was going to be subjected to in the Great Hall, he'd probably wriggled out of it.

At the pitch, Regulus completely turned in himself – he ran his laps in a trance-like state, his movements were automatic and he heard Potter's voice echoing faintly in his mind as he reviewed their strategies yet again, but wasn't actively processing any of it.

It wasn't until the announcer's voice boomed across the stadium, signaling the team's entrance, that Regulus snapped back to reality. He felt everything – the nerves, the determination, the focus – and heard everything – the distant cheers of the hundreds of people in the crowd, the announcer's excited chatter and the hurried pace of Potter's footsteps in the locker room.

Sirius and the Macmillan sisters were the first to walk out of the locker room onto the pitch – clearly excited, confident and maddeningly nonchalant, too. Hedge and Warlow followed, their expressions determined but twitching slightly with nerves.

Regulus knew that Potter wanted to go last, to have a moment to collect himself before throwing himself in front of the entire student bodies of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang and Merlin knows how many reporters, Ministry workers and, perhaps even scouts.

As Regulus made his way to the door, he hesitated, turning on his heel to take in the sight of Potter, who stood pale and visibly nervous. He looked at Regulus with a stressed, uncharacteristically insecure expression, an almost pleading look in his eyes.

Regulus locked his gaze and stepped closer.

"Remember," he said quietly, his lips curving into a small, reassuring smile. "Flying together — always."

His heart fluttered at the warmest, kindest smile that Potter gave him in return.

Then, Regulus took a deep breath, turned back to the door, and stepped outside.

The roar hit him like a wave, crashing over his senses with a force that was almost dizzying – cheers and shouts echoed across the pitch, mingling with uncharted decorations and banners. Regulus very much tried to ignore the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of eyes on him, his

heart pumping in his chest.

He swallowed hard, feeling the familiar lump rise in his throat – his stomach twisted uneasily as he paused, forcing himself to take another deep breath. And then, without giving himself time to hesitate, he pushed off the ground and soared into the air.

The wind rushed past him, cool and sharp, as his eyes swept over the stands; he spotted Cissy, seated beside Lucius and Yaxley, all looking up proudly. Then he spotted his friends scattered throughout the crowd, their faces blending with the bright blue uniforms of his Beauxbatons companions.

So many faces. So many eyes.

So many people to impress. To not let down.

Regulus exhaled slowly.

It was just another practice. He'd been flying from the moment he could walk. He could do this.

A sharp, unrelenting determination settled in his chest.

Focus.

We're going to do this.

With a final glance over the roaring stands, Regulus tightened his grip on his broom and surged higher.

He was ready.

*****

"AND BLACK HAS THE SNITCH!"

"HOGWARTS WINS!"

The roar from the stands was deafening — loud, overwhelming, and intoxicating.

He'd done it. They'd done it. Hogwarts had won.

Regulus barely managed to land on the ground before he was swept up in a blur of noise, movement, and emotions – cheers, applause, and screams from the crowd surrounded him. Everything was blurry as his

teammates rushed toward him, dropping all pretense of political considerations and house rivalries and half-hugged him, clapped him on the back, and shouted in triumph.

To his surprise, Sirius too came running towards him, grinning broadly.

“You did it, Reg!” he shouted, ruffling Regulus’s hair like he used to do when they were little. A very strange mix of sadness and warmth shot through him at the gesture. “ *We* did it!”

Regulus barely had time to process the effect of Sirius’s unfiltered enthusiasm before Potter stepped forward and half-hugged him. The embrace was quick but firm and warm, and despite the loud chaos around them, Regulus distinctly heard the words Potter whispered in his ear.

“I wish I could kiss you right now.”

Before Regulus could react, Potter was gone, striding across the pitch toward a cluster of Gryffindors and other acquaintances gathered to congratulate the Captain. They were far away, but close enough for Regulus to recognise some of Potter’s housemates and friends – the werewolf, Pettigrew, that annoying girl that had snogged Potter, and two older looking people; he couldn’t see them properly, but he then realised they must be Potter’s parents. Regulus froze temporarily, a jolt of something unexpected sending through him.

Regulus hadn’t thought about that – it was logical, *of course* Potter’s parents, his most loyal supporters, would be there to cheer him on. They’d built him a bloody Quidditch pitch in their backyard, after all. And yet, it came as a complete surprise and Regulus had a hard time grasping the oddity of finding himself in the same space as Potter’s parents – the people his brother idolised, the people *Potter* worshipped and had talked so much about.

The people he’d seen in the photo albums, whose presence he’d felt at Potter Manor without them actually being there. The people who had raised Potter – had raised him to become the bloke he was now, the bloke Regulus had – against all odds, against all rules – fallen in love with.

If unexpectedly seeing Potter’s parents wasn’t enough, Regulus’s gaze lingered long enough to see another trio walking his way, and Regulus realised, again a tad too late, they were wearing Beauxbatons colours. Before he could turn his head away to avoid the emotions shooting

through him, the strange emotions he couldn't really place, he recognised them – Théo, Bastien and … Mathilde.

Regulus's breath caught at the sight of her.

Mathilde Legot.

She looked normal – perhaps a bit thinner than he remembered, but then again, Regulus hadn't been particularly close with her…

Before he could dwell on his thoughts, he was jolted back to the present by his friends ambushing him with cheers and laughter.

"Bloody amazing!" Evan exclaimed, his voice brimming with pride.

Barty grinned wickedly, shouting, "*No flop with Black on top!*"

Mulciber, Avery and Severus followed with loud cheers and whistles, but their antics were quickly interrupted when Isa pushed her way through the chaos of the boys and stepped forward. Her smile was broad and warm as she wrapped Regulus in a tight hug, holding on longer than usual.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispered, her voice soft and sincere.

Regulus smiled back at her beaming brown eyes, but as the embrace lingered a moment too long, he noticed the suggestive and smug looks exchanged among the others. Breaking the hug, he ruffled her hair playfully — perhaps inspired by Sirius.

"Making Nott proud – the accomplishment of the year," Regulus teased with a smirk.

Isa rolled her eyes and swatted at his hand. "Don't make me take back my words, Black!"

Before they could say more, a familiar group of Beauxbatons students approached. Regulus's face broke into a genuine grin as Maxim and Lucien strode over, their broad smiles matching his own.

"*Le prochain match sera mortel,*" Lucien laughed in rapid French.

"Yeah, we're going to smash you, of course," Maxim added, his grin cheeky.

Solène and Élise followed closely behind, enveloping Regulus in warm embraces and each kissing him lightly on the cheek.

“You were brilliant, Regulus,” Solène said, her tone affectionate. “We’ve missed you.”

As the girls fussed over him, Regulus caught sight of Lucius, Yaxley, and Cissy weaving through the crowd.

“Impressive, Black,” Yaxley smirked, clapping him on the shoulders. His eyes travelled over the trio of Isa, Solène and Élise unabashedly. “*Impressive* ,” he repeated, his tone smug and dripping with innuendo.

Lucius intervened smoothly, sweeping in with a handshake. Cissy followed, pulling Regulus into a warm hug.

“You were magnificent,” she said softly, her voice full of pride. “I’m so proud of you.”

Loud chatter and banter erupted among his friends, eventually overruled by Barty, who threw an arm around Regulus’s shoulders.

“Let’s head to the castle — the feast’s about to start!” Barty shouted.

As with the previous match between Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, there would be a shared meal in the Great Hall for all students and spectators. Regulus was sure that afterwards all the respective houses were having a celebration in some way; his friends had of course taken care of all necessities for the after-party in the Slytherin common room. Regulus wasn’t particularly looking forward to being the centre of attention the entire evening, but he knew it was a lost cause; there was no way he could wriggle out of this.

As everyone started toward the castle, Regulus realised his Quidditch bag was, of course, still in the locker room.

“You lot go ahead,” he said quickly, not wanting to delay the group. “I need to grab a few things from the locker room. I’ll catch up.”

His friends, still brimming with excitement, waved him off and continued toward the castle, laughing and jumping as they went.

Before leaving, Cissy paused to grab his hand. “We’ll be leaving. I’ll see you soon, Reg,” she said softly.

Regulus nodded. “See you soon.”

Lucius and Yaxley offered parting smirks and claps on the shoulder before following Cissy, leaving Regulus to cross the now-empty pitch.

With many people already left for the Great Hall, it was refreshingly silent when Regulus walked over to the locker room. He felt overwhelmed – so much pressure, so many eyes, so many nerves before and during the match, and now flooded with so many people who, albeit with good intentions, wanted to congratulate him or have a few words. He sighed, reminding himself the day was almost over and that at least the horrible part of smalltalk and meeting people was finished.

Or, well, so he thought.

When he entered the locker room, his mind was still immersed in the match — replaying the key moments, the adrenaline rush the moment he realised he was actually going to catch the snitch. It took him a second to notice he wasn't alone.

A woman stood with her back to him, bent over a bench as she sorted through something. Regulus froze, surprised – this was a student locker room, after all, and she clearly was *not* a student.

Regulus cleared his throat awkwardly. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

The woman turned around, and Regulus felt as though the ground had fallen from beneath him; his breath hitched, his chest tightened and his face went pale.

He didn't recognise her at first when her back was turned, bent over the bench – but now, there was no mistaking her; her elegant features, warm brown eyes, and the chestnut hair flecked with strands of silver.

Potter's mother.

Her gaze was sharp, but her expression radiated a warmth that unnerved him possibly even more than any glare could have. A small smile played on her lips, inviting yet quietly assessing.

Regulus felt frozen to the spot, unable to summon even a twitch of movement.

"Oh, Mrs. Potter," he managed to breathe.

She chuckled softly, the sound light and reassuring, as if to put him at ease.

"Euphemia will do just fine," she said, her tone kind but teasing. "'Mrs. Potter' makes me sound so dreadfully proper, don't you think?"

Regulus somehow couldn't move, couldn't do anything but nod stiffly – his upbringing demanded poise, manners and charm, but he couldn't muster any of it in this odd situation, finding himself in a locker room with Euphemia Potter.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Regulus," Mrs. Potter said, her smile unwavering.

Regulus swore internally, cursing his inability to compose himself – he should've introduced himself properly, done anything besides stand there like a stunned idiot. But his shock was too big – he was too startled by seeing her in real life, so close, for the first time.

Mrs. Potter seemed unbothered by his silence, still smiling warmly. "It's nice to finally meet the one who's captured my son's heart."

Regulus's stomach plummeted as complete, raw panic surged through him.

"I—I don't—" he stammered, his voice cracking with alarm.

"It's alright, dear," she said gently, cutting through his flustered denial with ease. Her tone was so steady, so soothing, that it only made his panic worse. "I had my suspicions for some time. But when you came over during the holidays, I was certain."

Regulus blinked, his mind tripping over her words.

"P–James told you about that?" he asked, his voice tight.

She laughed then, a warm, melodic sound, accompanied with kind, warm eyes – like Potter's when they were completely alone and unfiltered. It stirred something unfamiliar and comforting in him.

"He didn't need to, dear," Mrs. Potter said with a knowing look. "Did you really think you could spend the night at my house without me knowing about it?"

Regulus opened his mouth, intending to apologise, but she held up a hand to stop him.

"It's okay, Regulus," she said simply. "It's okay."

And Regulus knew what she meant. As it was okay to spend the night at her house, it was okay to be with him, with her son, to love him, to be the one who her son loved in return.

Regulus was too overwhelmed to respond – too overwhelmed with the knowledge that someone besides himself and Potter knew – and that it was Potter's *mother*, and with the knowledge that she was *okay* with it; *okay* with Potter being with a bloke, and not just any bloke – *Regulus*, the heir of one of the oldest and most traditional families.

A moment of silence stretched between them. Regulus shifted uncomfortably, trying to find words, trying to find something to say – but his mind was completely blank.

Then she stepped closer, her gaze softening but gaining a serious edge.

"Can I tell you two things, Regulus?"

He swallowed hard, forcing himself to meet her gaze. "Of course, ma'am," he said, his voice low and hesitant.

Mrs. Potter's voice was kind, soft, yet steady.

"First, my door is always open to you — not just in the form of a sneaky rendezvous over the Christmas holidays." She chuckled warmly, a touch of mischief in her eyes. Regulus flushed, and she gave him a moment before her tone turned serious again. "Whatever happens, wherever life takes you both, you are always welcome in my home."

Regulus stared at her, his chest tightening with a surge of emotions he could barely process — relief, disbelief, and something so foreign and profound it made his throat tighten and his eyes sting. He nodded once, unable to speak.

"And second…" Although her voice softened further, the words pressed all the more. "Love is worth so much, Regulus. It's worth everything." She sighed, a trace of sorrow in her expression. "But if the love you share with my son puts lives at risk — yours, his, anyone's — you must fight. Fight for him. Fight for yourself. Fight for the future you both deserve."

Regulus's throat closed up entirely. He could feel the sting behind his eyes intensify. He swallowed hard, and after a long pause, his voice came out barely above a whisper.

"And if we don't?"

Mrs. Potter held his gaze, her voice steady but soft. "Then you must

ask yourself whether it's prudent to prepare for battle in the first place."

The words hung in the air – heavy and honest. She didn't deliver them like a slap in the face, but it still unsettled him, unsettled him more than any blow could have done.

Mrs. Potter stepped closer, her expression gentler now.

"You are good, Regulus," she said, her tone unwavering. "I know that. Otherwise, my son would never have fallen for you. Hold on to that goodness, no matter what. It will see you through."

Regulus flinched at the words.

You are good, Regulus.

Mrs. Potter gave him a moment before stepping back with a smile, light and warm.

"Well, I'd better be off," she said, her tone returning to its earlier cheerfulness. "I've got to hand over these things to my son before he completely forgets about his mother in all the excitement." She chuckled softly. "And you, I'm sure, have a match to celebrate."

Regulus nodded, finding his voice again, albeit weakly. "I do."

She turned to leave, pausing briefly to smile over her shoulder. "It was nice meeting you, Regulus."

His lips quirked in a contemplative smile. "It was nice meeting you too, ma'am."

Mrs. Potter laughed lightly as she walked away. "Blacks and their etiquette."

*****

The festive meal in the Great Hall passed in a blur. Regulus tried to enjoy the celebrations, the festive banter from his friends, the conversation with his Beauxbatons friends he hadn't seen for weeks and the stupid pranks Evan and Barty tried to pull on them, but he just couldn't shake off that nagging feeling, that strange feeling in his gut that Potter's mother had left him with.

She was everything he'd imagined her to be; warm, kind, welcoming, motherly, but also sharp, unyielding and, in a way, disarmingly

perceptive. He couldn't place it, couldn't pinpoint it and definitely couldn't rationalise it – but somehow meeting Mrs. Potter felt like a bigger event than winning a match in an international Quidditch tournament.

And she'd left him with so many emotions. There was fear – prickling, cold fear that came with the knowledge that someone *knew.* Regulus didn't consider himself naive or stupid; he knew that there'd always be a chance of people finding out; sure, he had ignored it sharply, the possibility completely shutting Regulus off, but deep down, he'd known there was always that risk. Yet he'd never imagined Potter's *mother* to be the one.

And then, her words – *you're good, Regulus*. They left him completely puzzled.

Was he though? Was he good? What did she mean with *good* ? They were modernists, blood traitors – Regulus was a traditionalist through and through – surely she knew that? Then what on earth did she mean with *good*?

Still, besides fear and confusion, there was another emotion clawing at him. Sorrow – a deep, aching sadness that bloomed at the realisation there couldn't possibly be a sharper contrast than that between Mrs. Potter and Mother.

Just the thought of Mother reacting like Mrs. Potter had – completely accepting of her son being in love with a bloke, and not just *any* bloke, but one of their families' biggest foes, welcoming him, offering advice, opening the doors to him. The idea of Mother reacting like that – it was so ridiculous it made Regulus want to laugh and cry at the same time.

He tried to shake off the thoughts during the afterparty in the Slytherin common room. The celebration was in full swing; music from the Wireless blasted, students danced alarmingly wildly and tables were filled with snacks, Butterbeer and illicit bottles of Firewhiskey. At some point, Regulus had managed to slip through the throng of people, dodging congratulations and more handshakes, and found a quieter corner of the room.

He sat on a sofa, nursing a butterbeer and sighing deeply as he tried to tune out the chaos. Across the room, he saw Barty attempting to playfully impress Isa with some sort of wildly exaggerated dance move. Regulus couldn't help but laugh hard at his antics and at Isa's

expression – shaking her head, clearly unimpressed though her lips twitched as if she were holding back her own laughter.

As Regulus shifted to get more comfortable, he felt a faint crinkling sound from his pocket. Frowning, he reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment. His breath caught as he recognised the familiar, messy handwriting.

Meet me on the 7th floor at midnight.

Regulus snorted softly as he reread the parchment, shaking his head at the audacity of it all. Potter, somehow, had managed to slip this into his robes without him noticing; he was still wearing his Quidditch gear, sticky with sweat and grime, as he'd had no time to shower or change since the match. He felt utterly disgusting in the filthy clothes, but there hadn't been a moment to himself all afternoon and evening.

He folded the note and tucked it back into his pocket. The boldness was almost laughable – the idea that Potter thought he could sneak all the way to the seventh floor unnoticed. Even with most of the castle preoccupied with the post-match celebrations, it was an absurdly risky plan.

And yet, despite all his reservations, the knowledge this was risky, *too* risky – not just because he wasn't allowed to wander the halls at night, but also because of the company he would be in – despite all that, the idea began to grow on him.

As the evening continued, the noise in the common room grew louder and more chaotic. At some point, Mulciber and Avery were dueling each other in the corner, their wands sparking with half-hearted jinxes. Barty and Evan had clearly tried to outdrink each other and downed more Firewhisky than anyone should, their drunken antics alternating between amusing and highly irritating. And with Isa and Severus, both tired of the chaos, already gone to bed, Regulus felt lonely and out of place.

And so, without fully understanding what he was doing – Merlin knew what came over him – Regulus found himself sneaking out of the common room and into the castle corridors. The walk to the seventh floor felt surreal, each step punctuated by the soft echo of his shoes against the stone floor.

The castle was eerily quiet and Regulus didn't even encounter Mrs. Norris on his way – he realised that perhaps the teachers were celebrating the victory tonight, too.

But as he climbed the stairs, the absurdity of what he was doing hit him – what was he thinking? Meeting Potter there, in the middle of the night. It was *so* risky – they could get caught, sneaking off, together, wandering the castle, in each other's company…

And why the bloody *seventh floor*, of all places?

His thoughts were interrupted by a voice, low and familiar, cutting through the silence.

"I knew you'd come."

Regulus jumped, startled. He spun around, his hand instinctively reaching for his wand, only to see Potter throwing off his Invisibility Cloak with a dramatic flourish.

"For fuck's sake, Potter," Regulus hissed. "Don't sneak up on me like that, especially not with your stupid cloak!"

Potter smirked, utterly unrepentant, stroking his cloak like it was a treasure. Which – to be honest – it was.

"Ah, but I know you're jealous of it, Black."

Regulus rolled his eyes, his gaze involuntarily drifting over Potter, who was also still dressed in his Quidditch gear. He looked way too confident for someone sneaking off in the middle of the night to the seventh floor of the castle.

"What are we doing here, Potter?" Regulus asked, his tone sharp.

Potter grinned, a mischievous glint in his hazel eyes. "I've got a nice surprise for you."

Regulus arched a sceptical eyebrow. "A surprise?"

"Yes," Potter said smugly, starting down the hall. "A very nice… meeting place."

"What are you talking about?" Regulus asked, unimpressed, following him despite his reservations about this meeting at this unholy place and hour.

"I've found a room that can cater to your every want," Potter said, his tone annoyingly cryptic.

Regulus didn't know whether he was annoyed or amused by Potter's

playful antics – the bloke truly found humour and adventure in everything.

“Ha, ha,” Regulus drawled, crossing his arms. “The only thing I want right now is a shower, clean clothes and a bed, Potter.”

Potter’s smirk widened, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Consider it done, Black.”

Before Regulus could roll his eyes again, Potter began pacing back and forth along a blank stretch of wall. He looked deep in thought, as if he were concentrating very hard on something.

What the *hell* was going on?

Regulus frowned, his irritation growing. “What the hell are you—”

He was cut short by the sudden appearance of a door, materialising out of nowhere.

Now, Regulus, being raised on many grande, magical estates, was no stranger to secret rooms hidden behind tapestries or suddenly appearing spaces, but to find this at Hogwarts was surprising — more surprising, though, was the fact that Potter had somehow managed to discover it.

Regulus stared, his mouth slightly agape.

Potter looked way too pleased with his revelation, smugly gesturing toward the door.

“Told you,” he smirked proudly.

“What the fuck?” Regulus breathed, his voice filled with disbelief.

“It’s called the Come and Go Room,” Potter explained, opening the door and stepping inside.

Regulus followed hesitantly, his eyes widening as he took in the room.

Inside, he found exactly what he had sarcastically asked for; a grande, neatly made bed, a pile of familiar clean clothes folded on a chair and — yes — even a bathroom with a gleaming shower visible through an open door.

Regulus was *very* impressed.

“What… is this place?” he asked, visibly stunned.

“It’s magic,” Potter said simply, still looking far too pleased with himself.

Regulus shot him a glare. “You have too many bloody secrets, Potter.”

Potter grinned, his pride evident. “I’m full of surprises, Black.”

Regulus looked around again, shaking his head slightly in goodhearted disbelief. Potter truly never ceased to amaze him.

He looked at the bed, snorting at the thought of sleeping in a bed with Potter at *Hogwarts* — sneaking off with a forbidden lover like they were in some stupid Muggle novel.

The shower, though, was very tempting… He definitely needed to take a shower at some point tonight before he went to bed, and his friends would definitely hex him if he woke them up by taking a shower in the middle of the night…

Regulus sighed in resignation.

“Alright. I’ll take a shower then.”

Potter nodded, himself walking around, inspecting the room.

“Go ahead.”

Regulus stepped into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He took a moment to exhale, then began peeling off his grimy Quidditch clothes. The warm water started to run automatically as he stepped into the shower. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the cool tile.

The warm water was divine; washing away the grime and sweat, and relaxing his body.

It had been an eventful day. He’d barely slept at night due to the anticipation, and had spent at least an hour and half on a *very* intense match. Their team had clearly been the best; Regulus was positive the entire team played their best game ever; not even the best practice came close to what they had pulled off during the match. Potter and the Macmillan sisters had played like a perfectly oiled machine, Sirius and Warlow had seemed to read each other’s mind, Hedge had been quicker and more decisive than ever and Regulus – Regulus hadn’t felt

joy like that for a very long time. After a couple of feints he'd quickly realised that the Durmstrang Seeker wasn't a particularly strong player, so he knew that even if he managed to spot the snitch first, Regulus would probably outfly him easily. So he'd flown around, keeping an eye on the snitch while thoroughly enjoying the game unfolding on the pitch. It had been great – yet also tiresome. And all the celebrations afterwards…

And the meeting with Mrs. Potter… Regulus wasn't sure whether he wanted to share it with Potter; he wondered whether perhaps she had, but he considered it unlikely. It felt like a private moment between him and her, and it felt odd to draw Potter into it. He took a deep breath and decided he'd think about that later; now he just wanted to enjoy the warmth of the shower and the feeling of being fresh and clean, thus he decided to blissfully think about nothing at all.

So, the soft creak of the door barely registered at first – it was the sudden chill of air that made Regulus's eyes snap open, his heart lurching in his chest as he saw Potter step into the bathroom.

"Potter, what are you—" Regulus's words faltered as Potter, with a calm smirk, began pulling off his clothes.

Regulus and Potter had never showered together, despite the fact that they'd shared a bathroom at Beauxbatons and had had millions of opportunities to share it. Somehow, the bathroom had been unofficially established as a private space, where they didn't intrude.

And although Regulus had seen Potter naked on many occasions, and had been *seen* naked by Potter on many occasions, this was different. In Potter's bed at Beauxbatons, they were partially veiled by sheets or the lack of light, and in the locker room they never undressed completely – it wasn't a nice, cosy place where they took time for each other; no, whatever they ended up doing there was hurried, sloppy and desperate.

So, to stand here in the shower, in front of Potter, without any clothes or sheet covering him, he felt more naked and exposed than ever before; so much even, that he briefly contemplated covering himself when Potter entered the bathroom.

Regulus saw it in Potter's eyes too – he locked gazes with Regulus, intense and full of emotion; raw vulnerability, determination and a touch of shyness gleamed in his eyes as he slowly peeled off his undershirt and tossed it aside.

“I’m in desperate need of a shower too,” he said.

Regulus felt rooted to the spot, his protests dying on his tongue as Potter’s trousers joined the pile of discarded clothing. Regulus’s gaze betrayed him, sliding down Potter’s body — flushed from the heat of the room and taut with lean muscle — to the part of his body already visibly aroused.

Regulus wanted to say something, wanted to respond – but all words vanished as Potter slipped out of the rest of his clothes, leaving him completely bare in front of him. Regulus was positive that he’d never been more attracted to anyone than to this version of Potter; hair sticking out in every direction, muscles tensing as he moved, skin glistening with condensation.

And of course, completely naked.

Regulus shivered in desire when he realised that Potter was already half-hard just by standing there.

They remained completely silent as Potter stepped into the shower, never breaking his gaze. Regulus shivered at the closeness when Potter’s hands instantly found Regulus’s waist, firm and steady, and leaned in. The kiss was slow and impossibly hot and wet under the water pouring over them, and Regulus was sure that he’d never been harder, never been more aroused in his entire life as he felt the hardness of Potter against his own, the slickness of the water amplifying the friction as their hips moved instinctively.

Regulus’s lips left Potter’s, trailing a path along his jawline before finding the sensitive skin of his neck. He kissed and nipped at the spot just below Potter’s ear, drawing a low, hypnotic moan from his throat. He wanted everything – wanted Potter’s tongue running over his body, wanted his hands around him, wanted to feel his breath against his skin.

Regulus’s breath hitched when Potter’s hand slid between them, wrapping firmly around him. He gasped, his hips bucking forward into the touch as Potter’s began to stroke him, the water making every movement slick and maddeningly pleasurable.

But then Potter’s other hand dropped to himself, and Regulus froze, his breath catching as he watched.

No, Regulus had to correct himself, it was *then* he was the most hard and aroused he’d ever been in his life; there was something insanely

private and arousing about Potter touching himself in front of him, unabashed yet vulnerable, showing how he liked to please himself. Regulus went crazy with burning desire at the realisation that he was given a glimpse into what Potter did all alone in the depth of the night in his bed when he was turned on, when he was hard.

Potter caught Regulus's gaze and he self-consciously dropped the hand around himself – apparently completely misreading Regulus's reaction.

"No, don't stop," Regulus rasped, his voice thick with arousal as Potter hesitated. "I like it."

Potter's lips quirked in a shy smile, his cheeks flushed, but he resumed, slower this time, deliberate in his movements as if putting on a show for Regulus. The sight was mesmerising — his hand gliding over his arousal, the soft sounds of pleasure escaping his parted lips.

"Tell me," Regulus said, his voice barely audible over the pounding water. "Tell me what you think about when you touch yourself."

Potter's strokes faltered briefly as he glanced up, his gaze locking with Regulus's. His lips curved into another shy smile, his voice low and rough. "You – you really want to know?"

"Yes," Regulus breathed, the single word a command, despite the tremor in his tone.

The idea of Potter sharing what he thought about, what he fantasised about to bring himself to release, was so hot, so erotic that Regulus was afraid he wouldn't make it though one sentence alone. He felt himself throbbing with need in Potter's hand and moaned embarrassingly hard when he felt his hands going over a sensitive part.

Potter exhaled a shaky breath, his hand tightening around Regulus before he answered.

"I think about your mouth," he said, his voice velvet-soft. "How it feels when you kiss me. How it would feel wrapped around me, taking me deep."

Regulus twitched in Potter's hand, his arousal reaching a fever pitch.

"I think about you on your knees," Potter continued, his strokes picking up pace. "Looking up at me, your lips wet. I think about all

the times you've had me in your mouth and made me lose it."

Regulus swallowed hard, his chest tight, every word sending him closer to the edge.

"And then," Potter said, his voice barely a whisper, "I think about taking you in my mouth. Tasting you. Doing all the things you like."

Regulus groaned in pleasure, his knees weak, his voice rough when he finally spoke. "Do you want to try?"

Potter's breath hitched as he looked in Regulus's eyes, his gaze determined and full of lust as he nodded. He slowly knelt to the floor, looking up at Regulus as his lips brushed against the head of his arousal, tentative at first, then surer, his tongue darting out to taste.

Regulus's head fell back against the tile, his eyes fluttering shut as Potter took him in, the heat of his mouth and the deliberate slide of his tongue under the water of the shower unlike anything he'd ever felt.

It was the most sensual, the most beautiful and most erotic thing that had ever happened to him.

And while Potter was moving around him, doing what he'd come to know Regulus liked, what pleased him most, Regulus forgot about everything – all the events of the day, where he was, who he was and who he was supposed to be.

*****

"*Oh*, not again," Regulus groaned as he stirred awake in the morning.

He had promised to himself, *sworn* to himself to sneak back to the dungeons into his dorm and *not* fall asleep in this stupid, yet awe-striking Come and Go Room.

Potter stirred against him, his back pressed to Regulus's stomach, his messy hair tickling Regulus's chin. Regulus's arm was securely draped over Potter's waist and the sight of him – bare, warm and close – sent an unwelcome warmth to Regulus's chest.

He suddenly realised how much he'd missed this – sleeping tangled in sheets and limbs, Potter's hair everywhere, the sound of his soft, even breaths when he slept. Regulus let his lips brush softly against the spot just behind Potter's ear.

Potter hummed in contentment, turning slightly to face Regulus. “Morning, sunshine,” he said, far too cheerful for this hour.

Regulus shook his head, fighting the smile tugging at his lips. “You and your bloody cheerfulness in the morning.”

Potter’s grin widened, his brown eyes twinkling with amusement. “Can’t help it. I can’t decide which is better—waking up knowing we crushed Durmstrang or waking up next to you.”

Regulus snorted. “That’s sacrilege, Captain. You’re supposed to put the team first.”

Potter stretched dramatically, his grin turning smug. “I’ll risk it.”

Then, Regulus suddenly realised, again, it was Sunday morning and that he hadn’t slept in his dorm.

“Shit,” he groaned, sitting up slightly. “I didn’t make it back. Barty and Evan will notice.”

Potter, utterly unbothered, dropped his head back against the pillow.

“You’re overthinking this – you’ve got clean clothes here, right? Just pretend you woke up early, grabbed breakfast, and hit the library.”

Regulus blinked.

“That’s… actually a decent plan.” He arched a brow. “You’re way too talented in the sneaking-around department, Potter.”

The proud look on Potter’s face betrayed that he definitely took this as a compliment.

“Years of practice, Black.”

Regulus reached for his watch and cursed under his breath.

“It’s already past eleven. I have to go.” He started to push himself up, but Potter caught his wrist, pulling him back down into a kiss.

It was slow and deep, Potter’s lips warm and insistent. For a moment, Regulus almost gave in, letting himself get lost in the pull of it, in the way Potter tasted like last night and everything that came with it. But then he pulled back with a long and suffering groan.

“Nope – gotta go, Potter.”

Potter propped himself on his elbows, watching as Regulus slipped on a blouse and a blue jumper. He went to stand in front of the mirror, smoothing out the fabric of his clothes and tucking the hem of the blouse neatly over the edge of the jumper. It was so weird to have his actual clothes summoned in this room.

Potter seemed to read his mind. “It’s what you wore at my place during the Christmas holidays – I must’ve thought about it when I summoned the room.”

Regulus shrugged. It didn’t usually wear Muggle clothes outside the common room – but it was a Sunday morning after the match and victory party, so it would do.

Potter sat up, tugging his own shirt on. “You should go first. Safer if we’re not seen together.”

Regulus nodded, lingering for just a moment, leaning against the wall, watching Potter get dressed. He was flooded by an odd combination of warmth and guilt coiling in his chest at the sight of Potter and the room. He shouldn’t have come; shouldn’t have been there; shouldn’t have spent the night with Potter at Hogwarts.

They kept pushing the boundaries. They were so reckless.

He straightened with a sigh. “I’ll be off, then.”

Potter smiled at him kindly and nodded before Regulus slipped out of the room and walked down the corridor. Immersed in thoughts and the realisation he’d better go to the library to sell the lie, he suddenly collided with someone.

Regulus was startled by the impact of the blow and the sound of books clattering to the ground. He glanced up and felt his heart sinking immediately.

Of all people, *all* people in the castle – it had to be the bloody werewolf to run into him just seconds after being naked with Potter in the room only yards away.

Lupin looked equally surprised, blinking at him and crouching to retrieve his fallen book.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, straightening.

Regulus nodded stiffly as he tried to compose himself. They stood

there for just a tad too long, the silence stretching just a bit too much, when Lupin's gaze flicked over him and then, suddenly – came to a halt on the crest on his sleeve.

Regulus's stomach dropped.

It was the same blouse he'd worn at Potter Manor; the blouse that had lain abandoned on the floor to be spotted by Lupin. The werewolf had even commented about the oddity of it being there.

Regulus knew then it was too late. It was done.

He flinched when Lupin's expression shifted, realisation dawning on his face followed by complete, utter shock. Regulus's stomach turned as he knew that Lupin had pieced it together.

Lupin inhaled sharply, as if hit by a hex, his voice barely a whisper. "It was you."

Regulus froze.

"You were… there," Lupin continued, his voice thick with complete shock. "You were… at Potter Manor."

Regulus paled. He didn't speak. He couldn't.

Shit, shit, shit.

Fuck.

"You… spent the night at Potter Manor? With… James?" he whispered.

Regulus was once again reminded that raw, blind panic completely froze him, as he still hadn't mustered the ability to move, or to speak.

Lupin's eyes darted down the corridor, then back to Regulus. "You spent the night with him here… too?"

Panic clawed at Regulus's chest.

No. No, no, no. Lupin couldn't know.

No one could know – but from all the people out there, it couldn't be Lupin. Regulus had heard it time and again, over and over; half-breeds weren't to be trusted. They were unreliable, untrustworthy. And on top of that, he was another of Sirius's best friends.

Oh, this was a disaster.

“You,” Lupin breathed, his voice trembling. “You — and James? You and James … you are…?”

Regulus’s mind raced, his pulse pounding in his ears – taken over by complete, submissing panic, like an animal cornered, under attack.

And then, so suddenly it startled himself, he switched. The panic disappeared as an icy calm surged over him.

It was alright. Lupin did not have him cornered at all. No – Regulus had a very strong card to play, still.

The words came out before he could overthink it further.

“Don’t wear yourself out, Lupin,” he said coldly, his tone sharper than he intended. “You’ll need the energy with the full moon so close.”

The impact was immediate and raw Lupin flinched as though slapped, his face paling as he took a step back.

“He… he told you?” Lupin stammered.

Regulus felt a strange sense of pride at the realisation that the roles were now turned. He had him cornered. Hampered. There was nothing Lupin could do. Nothing he could spill.

The moment stretched, Lupin looking at Regulus in complete shock, disbelief and hurt. Regulus didn’t answer, and then tore his icy glare away. He turned on his heel and strode away without so much as a word, leaving Lupin frozen in the corridor.

Chapter End Notes

> Alright, firstly, thanks for all the kind words I've been receiving! It's really nice to know there's an audience that is liking what I've written so far. ♥
>
> Secondly, I wrote the shower scene... then removed it... then wrote it again... and so on. In the end I've decided to keep it in because it shows how comfortable they've grown with each other. I think I'm a detailed, explicit writer but with these scenes I struggle to make sure it doesn't get too... blunt. I hope I've done it justice.
>
> Lastly, aaaah I'm so curious what you guys think of the current

and upcoming chapters. I've written these chapters' templates months ago, when I wasn't even halfway through the first book, and I'm looking forward to working them out.

Chapter 18: Of Valentine's & Love

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all again for the kind words & comments! You made my day.
>
> This and the following chapter are particularly dark and contain mature comment; depictions of (sexual) abuse, sex etc. Nothing new, but I'd like to mention it anyway.

Regulus hated Valentine's Day. It was a pointless, stupid day filled with forced displays of affection as authentic as Selwyn's intelligence. Now, he had never really cared for the stupid day, not even when they'd been allowed to go to Hogsmeade for the first time in third year, but since last year, he'd come to actually hate it. Because that was the year his friends had suddenly developed an interest in dates and snogging. On top of that, Regulus hadn't forgotten about his unfortunate meeting with Cissy last year in Hogsmeade, nor about the fact that he had punched Sirius squarely in his face in the castle, unleashing a very violent Muggle fight between the two of them.

He had hoped that with literally all his friends being single, he would've been spared the misery of this day and could go to the village just for the fun of it.

It then came as a very unpleasant surprise that nearly all his friends had secured a date with a girl – Evan was going with Melania, much to everyone's shock, Barty was going with Eira, and Mulciber and Avery with two of her friends. The only ones without a date were Isa and Severus, and they both had made it abundantly clear they weren't going to the village just out of principle. Regulus knew it was unfair of him to be annoyed by it, since they were both clearly suffering from some form of heartbreak – Severus from Evans, Isa from Davies – but it still infuriated him that he now had to to choose between tagging along as a third wheel or venturing into the village completely alone.

Because, like last year, Cissy had asked him to meet her in the Three Broomsticks, an invitation that, even if it hadn't been an order but really an invitation, he couldn't decline. It was Cissy, after all. Practically his sister, his closest family member and one of his closest friends.

So, with much reluctance and in an excruciatingly bad mood, Regulus

had slipped off to the village alone after breakfast, eager to meet Cissy on time so he could make it back to the castle sooner rather than later.

Sure, deep down he knew that there was more to his foul mood.

Ever since his encounter with the werewolf on the seventh floor, a heavy sense of dread had been gnawing at him. Lupin hadn't told Potter — Regulus was certain he'd have known if he had — but the werewolf's constant, annoyingly piercing gaze followed him like a shadow. Regulus could feel Lupin watching, analysing every secret interaction between Regulus and Potter; the secret smiles – teasing ones from Potter, reluctant ones from Regulus – and the fleeting moments of emotion when their eyes met across the Great Hall or corridors.

Regulus hated it – hated that the werewolf knew, but also that he found a way to intrude in these private moments with Potter, stripping him off all unrestrained demeanour. And, truth to be told, the fact that Lupin *hadn't* told his best friend yet spoke volumes about the werewolf's honesty.

As he entered the village, Regulus tried to shake off all the negativity; it was uncharacteristically sunny – cold, yes, but sunny for this time of year – and well, last year's Valentine's had been disastrous with him finding out he had to walk down the bloody aisle at Cissy's wedding *and* had been shamelessly fighting with Sirius, so this year… it could hardly be worse.

Cissy was here just to check up on him, making up for Mother who refrained from doing it, and they'd probably just have a coffee, share some food and part ways. No reason to be so bloody negative.

Afterwards, Regulus would laugh at this thought.

Because oh – how wrong he'd turn out to be.

When Regulus opened the door to the Three Broomsticks, the warmth of the tavern immediately welcomed him inside. There was already a large number of students filling the air with laughter and chatter. Regulus's eyes darted across the room as he shrugged off the cold, scanning for the familiar, warm face of Cissy.

He didn't miss the curious pairs of eyes landing on him as he walked in alone, probably speculating about who he was meeting there, when all of a sudden, he heard a familiar voice and felt a pair of familiar

arms around him.

“Reggie!” Cissy said, smiling radiantly. “You’re on time for once,” she continued, teasing, as she linked her arm through his and led him to a cosy table near the fireplace.

“Could hardly leave you waiting on Valentine’s Day, now could I?” he asked dryly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Cissy laughed as Regulus helped her get off her cloak, followed by his own, and settled into his seat. Immediately, Madam Rosmerta bustled over, glancing at the two in mild wonder.

“What can I get you two?” she asked.

“Coffee, please,” Cissy said with her trademark poise, her tone perfectly polite but no-nonsense.

“Same,” Regulus added, and Rosmerta gave them a warm nod before heading to the bar.

Cissy turned back to him, her blue eyes bright with curiosity. “So, how are you doing, Reg?”

Regulus rested his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. “I’m good, Cissy. And you? Busy?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” she said, her voice lower. “There’s so much happening right now, it’s dizzying.”

Regulus knew what she was talking about – the Revolution. Preparing for battle. Securing supply lines. Recruiting.

Her voice dropped just a fraction as she leaned forward. “You’re working on your… task?”

He nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

Despite Quidditch matches, Quidditch practice, the horrifying amount of O.W.L. work, his secret rendezvous with Potter and writing for *The Pure Quill*, he miraculously still found time to work on his task. He had made a list of all the Slytherins likely to join the Revolution if the time came, and their strengths, their connections to other friends or families. He’d started working on the other Houses, too – had collected all information he’d retrieved during his time on the Unity Project last year, collected all information he’d managed to gather

during Slughorn's Reception, and had neatly worked it out on parchment.

He knew it wasn't much – it was hardly like going to war, he didn't even have to lift his wand, but it was all they expected of him, so alas.

"Merlin, you must be so busy," Cissy breathed, apparently reading Regulus's thoughts. "You were *brilliant* in the match, by the way."

Regulus smiled. "What was it like in the stands?"

"Absolutely thrilling," she said, her tone earnest. "Honestly, I was impressed by the Hogwarts team – and so were a lot of other people. I might've spotted some scouts, you know."

Regulus snorted at her suggestion, leaning back in his chair. "Oh, right. And you think Mother will survive if I go for a career in Quidditch?"

Cissy threw her head back and laughed, the sound genuine and musical. Regulus felt a flicker of warmth in his chest — he'd missed this. Missed her. Had missed their dynamic.

"And you know they weren't there for me," he added, his smirk fading.

Cissy raised a delicate brow, her lips quirking into a knowing smile.

"No, I guess not. And I know I'm not really supposed to say this, but —" she hesitated, glancing around before leaning in conspiratorially. "I've never seen anything like it. The way he flies… the control, the speed, the intuition… to do that without professional training?" She shook her head. "It's extraordinary."

Regulus snorted softly, his mind drifting to Potter. Here she was, feeling like praising Potter on a broomstick was forbidden. If she only knew what had played out between him and Potter that was truly forbidden – oh, she'd be utterly scandalised by the truth.

They lapsed into lighthearted banter after that, Cissy filling the conversation with endless questions, gossip about her friends and funny familial anecdotes from the past. Regulus listened with amusement and felt happier than he'd felt all week.

But as the conversation lulled, Regulus noticed the subtle shift in her

demeanour.

Her smile slowly disappeared, changing into a serious expression, and her bright eyes grew dim with insecurity — and something worse. Something apologetic.

Regulus stiffened immediately.

He knew her well – well enough to recognise the warning signs, to know that this wasn't just a casual coffee chat. That there was a reason why they were sitting there. And that he'd find out about that reason very soon. And the way she avoided his gaze, her eyes darting to the floor, the way her hands folded nervously on the table, fidgeting with the delicate lace trim of her sleeve, told him everything he needed to know: he wasn't going to like this reason. He wasn't going to like it at all.

"Look, Reg…" she began softly.

Regulus flinched instantly.

"What is it, Cissy?" he asked reluctantly, his voice barely above a whisper.

She shifted in her seat, her hands now twisting the ring on her finger, a deep sigh escaping her lips. "There's… something I'd like to tell you. Something I'd like to share."

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face. His heart pounded painfully against his ribs as panic seized him.

What was this about? What had she been sent to do — or say?

"Go on," he said in a small, brittle voice.

Cissy hesitated, her eyes darting around as if checking they weren't being overheard. She leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. "You know how… how you collected your information for your last task?"

Regulus stiffened further, his mind racing. This was about his mission at Beauxbatons?

"Well," she continued, her words halting, measured, "it seems like… something's not adding up. The sequence of events — how it happened, how quickly — it was just… strange. Sure, they thought he'd refuse, or hide, but not like this. It… it took everyone by

surprise."

He arched an eyebrow, caught off guard by her vagueness. She was talking about Legot.

They had all refused to discuss what had happened to him, but now Cissy was touching upon it, voluntarily. He realised that now was the time to ask for details.

"What happened to him?" he asked cautiously, his voice low but steady.

Cissy sighed deeply, finally meeting his gaze. "He put up a fight. Didn't want to yield."

Regulus swallowed hard, a strange mix of emotions churning in his chest; dread at discussing the death of Legot and the fact that he'd somehow contributed to it, and… relief. Relief that it has also been Legot's own fault. He'd put up a fight. He hadn't wanted to yield.

Regulus nodded, attempting to keep his composure. "Alright," he said slowly. "So, what's the problem?"

Cissy hesitated again, her eyes clouded. "It's just… it doesn't add up. And so…"

Her voice trailed off, but Regulus didn't need her to finish. His chest tightened as the implication hit him like a punch in the face.

"They think I'm withholding information," he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. "They think I know more than I've told them. That I'm… what? Lying to them?"

"No, no," Cissy said quickly, waving a hand as if to dismiss the notion. "It's not that, Reg. They trust you. Everyone knows where you stand, that you're with the cause. No one thinks you're hiding things on purpose."

Regulus exhaled sharply, relief flooding him for a moment.

Good. That was great. At least they knew he wasn't a traitor.

The relief was short-lived, though.

Cissy's voice softened again, becoming almost timid. "They just want to turn every stone, you know. And well… perhaps something slipped your mind. Something you didn't realise was important."

Regulus frowned, concern creeping into his expression. He leaned forward, his voice growing sharper. “What are you saying, Cissy?”

She swallowed hard, looking at her hands again, before finally meeting his gaze.

Her blue eyes brimmed with guilt.

“They want to look into your mind.”

The words hit him like a bludger to the chest. His hand jerked reflexively, sending his spoon clattering to the floor, the sound ringing sharply through the room.

“W-what?” he stammered, his voice trembling.

“It’s not baseless,” she hurried to explain, her tone placating. “You could have information — subconsciously. Without realising it. And this is… a way to extract it.”

Regulus sat frozen, his mind reeling.

He knew immediately.

This was Bellatrix.

This was her revenge. Her retribution for their exchange during Uncle Alphard’s funeral. For the slight she had felt when Regulus had emerged from the shadows to claim the coveted position of Black heir, custodian of several estates. For the humiliation of having him outshine her with his mission at Beauxbatons.

She’d brooded on it, nursed the wounds to her pride. Had been planning a way to take her revenge. And now – now she had found the perfect way to make him pay.

Because she knew.

She knew – she knew how much he hated it. She knew how traumatic it had been, the last time they had thoroughly invaded his mind. How traumatic it had been when his entire soul had been splayed out like an open book, with her turning each page slowly and mercilessly.

And there, with her in his mind, Regulus had felt everything – every humiliating sensation of her delight as she uncovered his secrets, her sadistic glee at peeling back the layers of his thoughts and memories, the revulsion that had curled her lip when she found what those

secrets truly entailed.

It had been years, but he had dreamed about it so often – dreamed about her repulsion when she saw the governor's naked skin pressed against his own in his memories, about when she'd felt how Regulus hands had felt around him, disgustingly hard and throbbing, how Regulus had been so confused by the governor's panting and moaning, like a twisted lullaby, how he had been too afraid to rise up, but also… how thrilled, how loved he'd made Regulus feel when they were anywhere but in his bedroom.

Flying kites. Chasing snails. Riding broomsticks together.

She'd seen it all, she'd felt it all – the depths of his soul, the extent of their governor's actions, the tangled knot of emotions. The disgust, warring with the affection.

And she knew how it had broken him – she knew she had broken him perhaps even more than the governor had – how one moment of sadistic pleasure by her had counted for years and years of soul-wrenching abuse.

Bellatrix knew exactly what she had done to him that day.

Regulus couldn't respond. He was frozen, trapped in all the emotions and memories that churned in his mind. Eventually, Cissy's voice broke through, hesitant and apologetic.

"I.. I've managed to postpone it," she said. "There's not really a hurry; it's done and over, they just want to know… for the future." A tense silence stretched. "I thought it'd be better if I could warn you. And perhaps, you know, mentally… prepare yourself… a bit."

Regulus nodded automatically, the motion jerky, mechanical. Her words didn't truly register — blurry sounds like indistinguishable murmurs from underwater. His eyes were unfocused, staring, yet not taking in anything.

"They… they wanted to plan the meeting… now… while you're off to Hogsmeade," Cissy continued carefully, her hands still fidgeting with the sleeves of her robes. "Because, well, we don't have a Professor in the castle anymore, do we? You can't just step through a fireplace now…"

Regulus tilted his head, slowly.

His gaze met hers, alarmingly void of emotion, his face ghostly pale.

The realisation crept in.

“Easter,” he breathed, the word barely audible.

Cissy’s shoulders sagged, and she nodded. “Easter.”

*****

The rest of the week passed in a panicked haze. Regulus felt like he was floating outside his own body. Sedated and drugged, physically present but mentally adrift — everywhere and nowhere all at once. He spent the rest of the weekend in bed, pretending to feel ill, but instead lying tangled in his sheets, completely suffocated and smothered by the panic that had mastered every pore and every vein of his body.

There was no way, no escape — no way he was going to survive this. Even the clumsiest of Occlumens would be able to penetrate his mind easily, to find his deepest secrets without any effort. And he wouldn’t be subjected to clumsy Occlumens. No – it would be either Mother, merciful in comparison, or the Dark Lord, slightly worse; but most likely, most likely it would be Bellatrix.

Bellatrix would do anything, give up *everything* to do the honours. She’d revel in the opportunity to claw her way back into his mind, to wrap her sadistic hands around his soul and rip it to shreds, piece by delicate piece.

Oh, and what she’d find.

She’d uncover everything.

She’d find out about him and Potter. She’d feel the love pulsing in his heart. She’d be equally as disgusted as thrilled by it. She’d be frenzied, shout it from the rooftops, savouring the shame she’d bring upon him, upon his parents, upon everything. He could already feel the shame curling in his stomach, twisting. She would relish the betrayal, shaking with manic delight that both the first and last in line to the Black legacy had turned their backs on it all. Oh, how she’d enjoy the fact that he had betrayed everything, everyone. That he had feelings for a bloke.

But oh, it wouldn’t stop there.

She’d see everything.

She would see the way Potter had kissed him, touched him — made him climb higher and higher until his world dissolved into a blinding, shattering ecstasy. She would see what Potter's pleasure did to him: how it unraveled him, completely disarmed him, how it made him weak, desperate, reeling with want and desire – and how he knew it was wrong, how he knew he wasn't supposed to feel this way. Not for a bloke. Not for *Potter*, the ultimate blood traitor.

Oh, Bellatrix had no idea. Had no idea about the gold she was holding in her hands.

She just wanted them – or mostly herself – poking around for the thrill of it, under the pretense of looking for information.

She was going to find so much more.

She'd stumble into the world's biggest, most valuable treasure — and she wouldn't even have been looking for it.

And he – he was going to get killed.

And they were going to kill Potter.

The thought seized him completely – the terror and guilt ate at him, at his mind, his soul, his body. It was all-consuming, silencing him, isolating him from everyone around him, and he knew it was showing.

He hid in bed through the weekend, but on Monday he had to come out for classes.

When he entered the Great Hall for breakfast, it was clear he hadn't slept all weekend. His skin was ghostly, his cheekbones sunken, dark circles smudged like bruises beneath his absent eyes. He dropped into his seat and felt his stomach turn at the idea of having to eat.

Naturally, Isa noticed immediately. Her expression snapped to one of complete, raw panic instantly as she scanned his face. Her fork clattered to her plate.

"Regulus," she breathed, her voice trembling. "What happened?"

Barty and Evan exchanged uneasy glances, their attention quickly turning toward him.

"I'm fine," Regulus muttered, his voice hoarse and hollow, but no one believed him.

Six weeks.

He had six weeks until Easter.

Six more weeks to live.

Six more weeks for Potter to live.

He could warn him, at least. He could find a way to tell him to run, to hide, to disappear. Potter might still have a chance.

But Regulus? Regulus was a lost cause.

He was going to die.

And he deserved it.

The nightmares had returned. It had been months – almost the entire year, even – since they'd last plagued him. Ever since he'd slept next to Potter, the nightmares had faded. And even after, when he'd returned to Black Manor for he holidays and back to Hogwarts after, he hadn't once had a nightmare. For the first time in years, he thought he might be cured.

He had been cured.

But now they were back.

Fiercer, stronger, more relentless than ever.

Every night, he casted a silencing charm around his bed, because the demons at night had never been bigger, never been scarier. He was drowning in them.

He dreamed about everything – the governor's hands, the way he'd bite him playfully, marking him, the smell of his sweat penetrating his nostrils, the sound of his voice. *So wonderful. Such a wonderful boy*. And the way he'd groaned, moaned, grunted as he forced Regulus's hands to feel all of him, to do all for him. And like back then, in his dreams, in his bed, he was too terrified to move, to rise up, trapped, locked in all the agonising fear and violation.

And he cried, sobbed, wept through the night, neither awake nor asleep. He screamed until his throat was raw, his fists pounding against the bed, biting down on his own wrist. Every time he awoke, his entire body was soaked – the sheets drenched by his sweat and by him wetting himself like he used to do as a kid.

He tried to focus, tried to do his mind exercises — to block out everything, to lock away the emotions and memories, to rebuild the mental barriers he had so carefully crafted. But it was no use. He was completely derailed by the memories, thoughts, the emotions.

And he couldn't fucking sleep.

He was too terrified of what would happen if he did. Terrified of what his own mind might do to him while he was vulnerable.

But he couldn't take any potions, because he needed his mind sharp and alert for his exercises.

When had life become so torturous?

Would he, perhaps, die on his own accord?

Still, he went to class, went to practice. He carried on as best as he could, though it was obvious to anyone paying attention that something was wrong. He kept his head down, doing his best to hide the dark circles under his eyes, to eat enough to pass for normal, to laugh lightly at jokes, to nod in agreement when needed, to answer when spoken to. But he wasn't there – he was nowhere, neither asleep, nor awake, neither human nor a ghost, neither dead nor alive.

He was nowhere but in the land of dread, the earth of fear.

Isa noticed. She always did. She knew something was wrong.

She asked him about it more than once — what was wrong, what had happened to him. She knew him better than anyone. She was concerned, but equally helpless. Regulus could see the frustration in her eyes, how powerless she felt, unable to break through.

And he knew she whispered about it with Barty and Evan when he wasn't around, trying to figure out what was wrong, but none of them knew what to do.

What was he going to do?

*****

It took precisely a week before Regulus snapped.

It was a normal Saturday — they'd just had practice. It had been fine; a bit slower, more absentminded than usual, but alright. He had flown the drills, done the laps and caught the snitches. Potter had been

claimed by Sirius every time after practice for the past week, much to Regulus's relief, and they hadn't run into each other, hadn't spoken. It was for the best – Regulus knew he wasn't in the shape to deal with anything.

Now, however, Sirius had bolted from the locker room, saying something about meeting his girlfriend at the castle – eventually leaving Potter and Regulus alone in the space.

Potter was distant, fiddling with the straps of his gear longer than necessary, but Regulus barely registered it. He was focused on pulling his robes over his head, on tying his shoes. He was seconds from leaving when Potter finally spoke.

"You look tired."

Regulus nodded, his movements robotic, his voice devoid of emotion. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Potter hesitated, frustration flickering across his face. Then, as if gathering courage, he added, "I had a conversation with Remus."

Regulus froze for a split second, his fingers pausing on the hem of his sleeve.

He truly couldn't deal with this. Not now.

Merlin, not *now*.

"Did you now?" he asked, his voice flat.

Potter's tone hardened. "You threatened him, Reg?"

Regulus straightened and turned, his expression blank.

"I did no such thing."

Truth to be told – he hadn't *actually* threatened him. Had only advised him to not stress too much as not to lose his much needed energy for the full moon.

Potter's jaw tightened. "You told him that I told you about… him?"

"I did not do such a thing," Regulus repeated, his tone eerily calm. He truly hadn't – that was just an assumption made by Lupin.

One he hadn't truly bothered to refute, but alas.

Potter exhaled sharply, anger rising. “What is wrong with you?”

Regulus’s mask cracked for just a moment, his lips curling into something bitter.

“Look, Potter, it’s never wrong to have the upper hand. To let the other party know there’s something at stake for them, too.”

Potter stared at him, equally baffled as disgusted. “What is *wrong* with you? Remus wouldn’t tell a living soul — he’s trustworthy!”

Regulus scoffed, a sharp, humourless sound.

“No, Reg, this is — this is seriously fucked up. That you—”

“*No!* ” Regulus’s voice rose suddenly, cutting Potter off. His finger shot in the air, pointing violently at Potter as his composure completely shattered. “No, Potter! I can’t deal with this right now. There are so many more important things in the world than you and your precious fucking werewolf! Just fuck off, Potter! Fuck off!”

The words hung in the air like a slap.

Potter stood frozen, stunned into silence, his mouth opening as if to say something, then closing again. He looked at Regulus like he didn’t recognise him – which he probably truly didn’t.

Regulus didn’t wait for a response. He grabbed his bag, shoved past Potter, and stormed out of the locker room.

The walk back to the castle was a blur. Rage consumed him, blinding and suffocating. He barely registered the people he passed, too immersed with the want, the need, the *desire* to punch something, to hit *someone*, to *kill* someone, to tear something or someone apart. He wanted to punch a hole through the wall, to tear apart the world with his bare hands.

By the time he reached the Slytherin common room, he was trembling with fury, having no clue how he ended up there or who he’d walked past. Barty, Evan and Isa were gathered in their usual spot, laughing about something – the moment Regulus entered, though, their laughter and conversation died, replaced by cautious, alarmed glances.

Too preoccupied by his anger, he didn’t acknowledge them, didn’t stop, didn’t hear Isa call his name.

He had barely made it to the dorm and casted a silencing spell before he exploded.

Books flew off his nightstand, crashing to the floor in a chaotic heap. His wand followed as he threw it violently away, and it was a miracle it didn't snap on impact. Then he mercilessly tossed his Quidditch bag into the corner. And then – then he screamed, the sound raw and guttural as he collapsed onto his bed, burying his face in his hands.

Never, ever, in his entire life, had he felt so angry.

Never, ever, in his entire life, had he felt so afraid.

"Reg?"

The voice was soft, cautious.

He looked up, his face flushed, his eyes blazing. Isa stood in the doorway, her gaze darting between the chaos around him and his defeated state.

He looked at the chaos, too, taking in the Quidditch bag on the floor, grabbing his wand, and glancing at the books so disrespectfully tossed onto the ground. He looked at the book that Isa had given him for Christmas.

Veil of the Mind: Mastering Occlumency for Soul and Memory Restoration or Reformation.

There was no way. No way he could do this alone.

There probably was no way either if he had help.

But it was all he could still do. All he could still take. All there was still left.

He sighed and rose from the bed.

"Walk with me," he said, his voice low and commanding.

Isa nodded instantly. With a flick of her wand, the room began to tidy itself. Then, she followed him out of the dorm into the common room. They were followed by the eyes of Evan and Barty, but Regulus ignored them. They walked into the dimly lit corridors, Isa trailing behind him, her pace quick but cautious, her alarm palpable in the quiet. She didn't say a word, and neither did he.

They didn't stop until they reached the Charms classroom on the third floor, the door creaking open.

Once inside, Regulus immediately started to pace the room. Isa closed the door behind them, leaning against it, her eyes following his frantic movements.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, opened it again, to close it. He ran a trembling hand through his hair. He walked up and down the room again. Opened his mouth, just to shut it again. He paced the length of the room, his shoes scuffing against the stone floor. He raised his hand as if he were going to break some news, then dropped it again. He stopped to grip the edge of a desk, then let go and resumed the pacing.

Still, no words came.

He had no fucking clue where to start.

"Reg," Isa said softly, cautiously, "what's going on?"

He slowly turned to her, his face pale and drawn, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. Isa looked at him with large, concerned, brown eyes, her posture rigid.

Finally, his voice broke through the silence, shaky and desperate.

"You… you've got to help me, Ies," he managed to choke.

And then, then he broke.

His composure completely crumbled as he broke out in tears. Silent tears began to stream down his pale cheeks, his eyes wide in complete and utter panic. He had no control — no control over his tears, nor over his trembling hands.

Isa's alarm spiked. She hurried toward him, her voice panicked but steady.

"Yes, of course, Reg. What — what's going on? What can I do?"

He inhaled sharply, his hands flexing and curling into fists. "So — I had a mission at Beauxbatons," he began, his voice strained.

Isa's brow furrowed, her concern deepening. "Alright…"

"They… there are some loose ends," he continued, his words faltering

as his breathing quickened. “So they want to… go into my mind.”

Isa stilled, her expression growing alarmed. “Oh,” she whispered, “that’s… that’s horrible, Reg…”

Isa clearly thought about what she’d overheard in Damascus; the fact that Bellatrix had penetrated his mind and uncovered the abuse he’d been subjected to for years. Regulus realised that she thought it was the trauma of that specific event with Bellatrix that had sent him into this state.

She had no idea.

“No!” Regulus shouted, shaking his head violently. “No, no, Ies. You don’t — you don’t understand. They… they *cannot* go into my mind. They mustn’t!”

His voice cracked on the last word. Isa looked at his pleading, panicked eyes, and then realised.

“There’s something they can’t know — they can’t find out when… they enter your mind.”

Regulus didn’t answer, but the way he flinched was enough of an answer.

She took a steadying breath, probably trying to calm herself as much as him.

“Alright,” she said, nodding solemnly. “So… do your exercises. You’re a very gifted Occlumens, Reg. Just… strengthen your mental walls, your barriers.”

“No, Ies.” His voice was low and trembling, his eyes wide and haunted as they locked onto hers. “I *used* to be a good Occlumens. I’m not anymore. They’re going to break me immediately.”

Isa frowned, raising an eyebrow. “That makes no sense, Reg. You’re either a good Occlumens or you’re—”

She froze mid-sentence. The realisation dawned like a lightning strike, her words catching in her throat.

“Or there’s… something weakening your defenses,” she whispered, her voice soft and disbelieving. “Temporarily.”

Regulus flinched, his eyes darting away from hers, but she definitely

caught the flicker of shame and fear in his gaze. Isa's mind visibly raced, the pieces clicking together.

There are soul-altering forces able to shake even the strongest Occlumens. Chief among these is love, particularly the heady, consuming phase of infatuation rather than the stable, settled affection that often follows. It is really the infatuation that erodes the mind's defences.

Her breath hitched as the truth slammed into her.

"You – you're in love."

Chapter 19: Of Memories & Intrusion

Chapter Notes

> TW: mature content, (graphic) depictions of (sexual) abuse, and so on, and so forth

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You – you’re in love.”

Regulus sighed, leaning with his back against the teacher’s desk. The hard edge of the wood pressed into him.

“I am in love,” he whispered.

It was the first time he’d said it out loud — had said it so bluntly. Yes, he’d once confessed he fancied Potter — to Potter himself — but that was different. What they’d had, what had developed between them; it wasn’t a stupid teenager crush.

No, you don’t endanger the lives of so many people for a simple crush.

He closed his eyes briefly, pulling in a deep breath to steady himself, to prepare for what came next.

“With whom?” Isa asked, her voice barely above a whisper and laced with curiosity.

When he opened his eyes, she was standing right in front of him, her brown eyes searching his face. He hesitated.

“I can’t tell you.”

Her head tilted, confusion flickering across her face.

“I can only show you.”

He felt so exposed, so vulnerable, standing in front of her.

The moment he’d spotted the book in his dorm and Isa bursted inside, he was reminded of their Occlumency project in Damascus.

And it was then he realised there was only one way out.

Build the barriers. Restructure his mind. Strengthen the defences.

He needed her. Needed Isa. Perhaps with her help, he'd be able to strengthen his mind. It was unlikely, yes, but it was his only chance…

And for that, for her to help with that, she had to enter his mind. There was no other way.

Slowly, Regulus took in another deep breath to steady himself and pulled out his wand. Isa observed every movement, every flicker of emotion across his face.

With two flicks of his wand, he had closed the door and casted a silencing spell.

The room was eerily silent, and he suddenly realised how calm he was, how odd it was he didn't hear his heart hammering in his chest, how he didn't even tremble, considering what he was about to do. What he was about to confess.

No, he looked completely at ease — an eery, ominous silence before the storm.

Slowly, he put his wand on the desk, an illustration of how he disarmed himself completely by letting her in. How he was completely surrendering himself to her.

Isa's sharp eyes lingered on the wand on the desk.

"Draw your wand," he said softly, his voice steady and low.

She hesitated only briefly before pulling her wand from her pocket.

Regulus dropped his arms to his sides, his stance loose, but his gaze sharp, determined.

"Enter my mind," he commanded.

Isa swallowed visibly, but she raised her wand steadily, her resolve matching his.

"Legilimens," she whispered.

The moment the spell touched him, he felt her presence – his defences had crumbled, yes, but not that badly. He just didn't put up a fight. Didn't even try in the slightest to block her out.

He wanted her there, wanted her to see.

He felt her curiosity, but also her concern as she entered the dark fog in his head. Regulus swallowed again, and felt his pulse thundering in his ears. He steered her carefully, deliberately, towards his biggest secret, his biggest lie — yet the truest part of his life, too.

There were so many memories, so many things he could share. So many things he *had* to share. He decided to direct her only gently, knowing that in his panicked, chaotic mind, it was no use trying to steer her too specifically. She'd see it all, anyway. She'd see all of it.

He sighed, knowing that Isa felt how he braced himself for what was coming. And then, then he thought of him.

Several memories of him flashed through his mind – walking into this exact classroom for a Unity meeting. A mundane, ordinary memory of Regulus sitting with his group mates until Potter entered the room, wearing a dark and simple turtleneck, his hair damp from the shower and looking *incredibly* handsome. As in the memory itself, he felt his throat go dry and his heart spike in reaction to Potter slouching into the chair beside him.

"Evening, Black."

And then his mind flipped to another memory, in the same classroom, where they'd been duelling each other for practice. Regulus remembered how numb he'd felt from all the nightmares, his meeting with Cissy in Hogsmeade and his fight with Sirius. And then, how they'd almost blown up the classroom with their duelling antics, one spell more ridiculous than the other, until Regulus had literally flown atop of Potter – and how they'd howled with laughter. How Regulus had tried to compose himself, but how, every time he looked at Potter, he had bursted into unrestrained, uncontrollable laughter again, making him gasp, making him double over.

"Shit, you flew," Potter managed between fits of laughter.

Regulus clutched his side, the laughter bringing a stitch of pain, but it didn't matter. It had been so long since he'd laughed like this.

"Now… who won?" Regulus asked, attempting to put on a serious expression, but one look at Potter's startled face sent him into another bout of laughter.

And then, how Potter had lured him into the lake at Beauxbatons, bare-chested, laughing mischievously and without restraint as he held Regulus's wand, dunking it low into the water.

“You want it back? Come get it, Black, or it’s going under!”

Regulus knew that the memories came so fast that Isa had no time to process what she was seeing, to connect with her own emotions through feeling those of Regulus in the present and in his memories. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to keep going as he shifted the scene. The memory dissolved into shadow before reforming into the antechamber of Hogwarts.

“Here,” Potter said, holding a cup up with a grin. “The non-spiked ones, I promise.”

Regulus’s heart raced as he took a step forward, taking both drinks and, in a smooth, deliberate motion, placed them on a small stone ledge nearby. Potter was visibly confused.

Then, without warning, without so much as a second thought, he ignored the pounding of his heart, reached up, and seized Potter’s face, turning him toward the wall as he pulled him into a kiss.

It was an explosion – a burst of want, desire and fire spreading through Regulus with a ferocity he’d never felt before. The taste of Potter’s lips, his hands threatening through his curls, Potter’s body as Regulus pinned him against the wall.

Oh, and Potter’s shuddering gasps against his lips, his warm fingers tracing the skin at his neck, igniting every vein of his body, making him clinging tighter, desperately.

And then, as he’d pulled back – the shaky hand that Potter ran over his face, staring at Regulus with a raw, disarming vulnerability, his gaze a mixture of hope, frustration, begging for Regulus to see, for him to understand.

“Fuck Black – you’re killing me…”

The spell broke.

Isa’s wand slipped from her fingers, clattering to the floor. She stumbled back, her eyes wide, unblinking, fixed on Regulus.

The classroom was completely silent as Isa took a step back, then another, her breath unsteady.

Regulus trembled against the desk, his hands running over his face in an attempt to steady himself, to ground himself against the revelation.

Their eyes met.

Isa's shock was etched plainly across her face – her eyes were wide, her lips parted.

"*No*," she whispered, her voice dripping with disbelief. "*No*."

A silence stretched between them – heavy and suffocating. Regulus swallowed hard, trying to rid himself of the painful lump forming in his throat.

"*No way* ."

Isa stood completely frozen, her wide eyes locked on him, her mouth still agape, unable to form another word. The silence stretched painfully, unbearably.

Then, as if snapped out of a trance, she began pacing the room, her hands flying up to her head before falling back to her sides in rapid succession. Regulus sat perched on the teacher's desk, his posture crumpled, defeated. He supported his face with his hands, his elbows braced on his knees.

"Oh," Isa finally sighed, the disbelief still thick in her voice. "You… and a Gryffindor."

Regulus couldn't help it – despite the pounding of his heart, the panic clawing at his chest and the overwhelming nerves, a mirthless laugh escaped him, low and sarcastic.

"Really, Not?" he asked, rubbing his temples, his voice dry. "*That's* what you took from this?"

Isa shook her head fervently, her pacing growing more agitated.

"No — no," she said quickly, the words tumbling over themselves. "The rest — I'll get there — I just need a minute to wrap my head around the rest." She stopped mid-step, swallowing hard, her brow furrowed deeply. "You — you've got to give me a minute, Reg."

Regulus closed his eyes, nodding softly, even as his chest tightened further.

He needed her. *He needed her.* Oh, what if she was too disgusted, too appalled by it? What if she refused to help? She was his only chance, his *only* chance.

And if she refused – what would she do, instead? Just walk out and leave him alone in this, or worse? Would she tell everyone? Would she tell Mother? Or their friends?

Isa resumed her frantic pacing, her shoes scuffing loudly against the floor. She'd occasionally shake her head, let out a sharp disbelieving sigh, and then continue the endless loop.

Regulus watched her, his nerves building beyond what he'd thought was possible, every movement she made setting him further on edge.

Finally, she stopped abruptly, turning to face him, her gaze piercing.

"You're gay," she breathed.

Regulus froze. It was as if she'd hexed him straight in the chest.

He'd never allowed himself to think it. Never said it aloud. Never even considered what it might mean.

"Are you gay?" Isa asked again, her voice barely audible, shock etched into every syllable.

"I — I don't know," Regulus croaked, his voice cracking.

He had no clue – had never thought past James Potter. Had never thought of anyone that way, no girl nor bloke. It wasn't really a matter of being a girl or a boy – only a matter of being James Potter or not. It was either James Potter or no one.

"Oh god," Isa whispered, drawing a sharp breath to steady herself. She exhaled shakily. "And with *him*… With… James Potter."

She resumed pacing, her movements now frantic and disjointed. Her wand, which she had retrieved from the floor, was spinning between her hands as she twisted it back and forth like a nervous tic in deep, stressed contemplation.

Regulus's chest felt like it might collapse. His throat tightened painfully as he forced himself to speak, his voice small and cracking with emotion.

"Do — do you hate me, Ies?"

Isa stopped in her tracks. For a moment, she stood frozen, her expression softening as realisation set in. Then, with a purposeful step, she walked over to him. She stood right in front of where he sat on the

desk, her gaze kind but sad, searching for his eyes, trying to catch the guilty, pained look he couldn't hide.

"Oh god, *no*," she breathed, her voice shaking slightly as she took his cold, trembling hands in hers. Then, without hesitation, she moved closer, leaning in to rest her head against his chest. It was a half-embrace — him sitting stiffly on the desk, and her standing close – but it felt like she'd wrapped, had enveloped his soul completely with all her warmth and all her acceptance.

"You're my best friend, Reg," she whispered, her voice firm. "All of you. Every part of you is my best friend. I couldn't hate you even if I tried."

Regulus felt the words sink in.

Every part of you is my best friend.

He closed his eyes, resting his chin on top of her head, her soft hair brushing against his skin. He took in the familiar scent of lavender and vanilla as relief washed over him in waves, so overwhelming it almost made him lightheaded. There were no words, in no language, in no tongue, to describe the feeling of affection, of sheer gratitude, of love he felt for her at that moment.

They stayed like that for a long time, the silence filled only by their breathing.

Finally, Isa stepped back, her hands slipping away as she sighed deeply.

Her tone shifted as she switched to strategy mode.

"Alright, so when is this happening? When are they going to… you know, do it?"

Regulus let out a breath, leaning back slightly on his hands. "Over the Easter holidays."

Isa's eyebrows shot up, and she let out a short, bitter laugh. "Bloody hell. You and your damned Easter holidays from hell."

Regulus couldn't help the snort that escaped him — because, honestly, she wasn't wrong. He thought last year's Easter fiasco couldn't possibly be outdone with the rehearsal dinner and Cissy's wedding – but somehow, against all odds, it turned out it wasn't even the highest

circle of hell.

No, this year's Easter holidays were shaping up to be even worse.

Isa shot him a pointed look and then began pacing again. Her wand was out again, swirling absently in her hand as she walked, keeping her hands busy as her mind visibly raced.

"That's… a little less than six weeks," she calculated.

Finally, she stopped mid-step, her gaze snapping to his with a resolute intensity.

"We're doing it," she said firmly. "We're going to do it. We'll do exercise after exercise, spend every waking minute outside of class on this — we'll build your walls, strengthen your barriers."

Regulus slid off the desk, standing to face her.

"You think we can pull it off?" he asked softly, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

Isa sighed, her expression flickering with weariness before hardening with resolve. "We'll have to, Reg. We'll have to."

The room fell silent again.

"Or they might just kill you."

*****

True to their word, Regulus and Isa spent every waking moment of their free time leading up to the Easter Holidays on Occlumency. Every minute not consumed by class or Quidditch was devoted to books, pacing the room, proving minds and fortifying mental barriers.

The first night after revealing his biggest secret to Isa, Regulus slept better than he had in an entire week – still awful, yes, but at least Isa's determination had given him a flicker of hope strong enough that he had screamed through a part of the night only rather than its entirety.

They dove in immediately on Sunday. In a prudent attempt to stay away from Potter as much as possible, they took breakfast in the Kitchens where they discussed their modus operandi at a small table surrounded by bustling House Elves.

"Alright," Isa began, sighing between bites of toast. "We already know

a lot – there might be a few books in the library offering material we haven't tackled yet, but I think we covered most of it last summer."

Regulus nodded, a tad stiffly thinking, now, in the morning, freshly realising that Isa knew his biggest secret.

"So," Isa continued, "I guess it comes down to you doing your individual exercises every morning and evening, and we'll… we'll just practice. Practice endlessly. In the meantime, we'll comb through everything the library has to offer, just in case there's something new."

Regulus nodded again, feeling hesitation in Isa's voice.

"And…" Isa's gaze faltered as she set her toast down, brushing crumbs from her fingers. "Well… you know you've got to end things — with him."

Regulus flinched, avoiding her uneasy gaze.

He knew he had to – he'd *always* known he'd have to end things with him eventually. They had no future, nothing good would come from them continuing what they'd been doing. And especially now, now that he had to strengthen his mind, block him out of his memories, on demand, he had to stop feeding his mind, his emotions.

His thoughts flickered to their last encounter in the locker room.

Fuck off, Potter!

"Yeah," he breathed, barely audible. "I know."

Isa nodded, turning her focus back to her food, giving him space to process.

Toward the end of their meal, Regulus sighed, voicing the question that had been nagging him. "Where are we going to do this? The Charms classroom?"

Isa looked up at him thoughtfully, tapping her finger against her mug.

"No," she said after a moment, shaking her head. A small smile curled at the corners of her lips. "I know the perfect place."

Minutes later, they exited the Kitchens, Isa striding with determination up the staircases. Regulus trailed behind her, matching her pace as best he could. By the time they passed the sixth floor, he

realised where they were going.

So *this* is where Davies and Isa used to meet.

They stopped in front of the familiar empty stretch of wall on the seventh floor. Isa stood there, her arms crossed, eyeing Regulus with a subtle smugness in her eyes – clearly waiting for him to ask her to share her grand revelation.

Leaning casually against the opposite wall, Regulus arched a brow and asked dryly, “Aren’t you going to walk up and down the wall?”

Isa snapped her head toward him, her eyes narrowing. “You know about this room?”

Regulus tilted his head, giving her a pointed, sarcastic look.

“Obviously.”

Isa’s expression shifted, realisation dawning.

“You and Potter… here?”

The image struck him before he could stop it — Potter on his knees in the shower, hands gripping Regulus’s thighs, his lips moving —

Regulus flushed, snapping his gaze back to Isa.

“How do *you* know about this room, Nott? Does Davies, by any chance, have anything to do with that?”

Now it was Isa’s turn to blush, her cheeks reddening as she rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Oh, shut it, Black.”

Without further delay, she strode along the wall three times, conjuring a door.

“Let’s do it.”

*****

It was the most unnerving, unsettling and profoundly uncomfortable feeling to have his mind probed constantly, especially in the beginning when his defences were weaker than they’d been for years.

The only notion helping him through it, the only source of resolve was the thought that the more Isa knew, the better she’d understand.

Yes, her initial reaction had been much, much better than he'd envisaged, much better than he could've dreamed of, but well — he knew it must've shocked her. He knew how unconventional, how abnormal it was.

This idea that her comprehension might grow, might deepen, was the only thing that kept him sane as Isa combed through the deepest layers of his soul, of his strongest emotions, his most visceral fears, his best-concealed secrets and his most fragile, vulnerable moments.

The first time had been brutal.

It was a lot to ask, not only from Regulus, who'd never felt so exposed before, but also from Isa, who had to deal with all the things she was forced to witness as long as Regulus's walls weren't strong enough. And he knew, deep down, that his memories of him and Potter wouldn't even be the worst of it.

Already before starting, Regulus had known this — known that it'd be horrible, painful, dreadful. And yet he felt completely unprepared as she'd entered his mind.

Isa stood in front of him, wand at the ready. Her gaze was steady, but Regulus didn't miss the faint flicker of unease in her eyes.

"All right," she said softly, her voice calm but firm. "Ready?"

Regulus nodded, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "Yes."

This time would be different from the Charms classroom; he wasn't guiding her now, wasn't opening his mind for her to explore. He had to defend himself from her intrusion — wandless, just as he would be when his true test came over the Easter holidays.

"I won't do association – we'll get to that later, alright?" Isa continued. Fighting intrusion by association was the hardest form; entailing the intruder would actively try to provoke memories, to stir thoughts and emotions using associations. In Regulus's case – only the name *James Potter* would provoke so many memories that it would probably unravel everything. Association would be the last stage, their last station – if they even managed to get that far.

"For now," Isa continued, "I'll go in blankly. No associations, just clawing onto whatever I find."

Regulus said nothing, his jaw tightening as he braced himself. He let

his eyes sweep the room one last time before locking her gaze.

“Legilimens.”

As usual, he felt her presence instantly. The fog in his mind stirred. Just before locking eyes with Isa, he’d spotted a red blanket in the corner of the room, now triggering a chain reaction deep within him. The colour reminded him of Gryffindor red and of that familiar red jumper, and without meaning to, his mind flipped to a memory.

He was in the Charms classroom, sitting on a pouffe, watching one of the Quidditch screenings with Potter. Potter was wearing the jumper – red as a sign of Gryffindor pride – and laughed richly and loudly as Regulus threw a handful of popcorn in his hair, feigning innocence as Potter batted it away with mock indignation. Now, in the memory, he felt the humour and the joy of sitting there, laughing without restraint in the safe bubble he and Potter had created. Before he could make sense of the strange sensation of melancholy spreading through him, he felt Isa pressing harder. Regulus sensed the pressure in his mind intensify, and he managed to hold her back — barely, though.

But the red lingered, shifting into another memory.

Bellatrix, draped in a blood-red dress, her dark curls bouncing wildly, spun through the halls of Seacliff Hall, singing a mocking lullaby. She held his stuffed dragon just out of reach, laughing as Regulus, a small boy, chased after her, his hands trying to grasp it.

The melody of the lullaby echoed faintly twisting and warping as it pulled him deeper – this time, the lullaby played softly, but now accompanied by the governor’s voice as he tucked Regulus into bed. A sharp pang shot through Regulus as he saw his face up close – the warm, dark eyes, the familiar stubble on his jaw.

He felt Isa’s presence pressing further, pushing at the edges of the scene. The memory shifted again, fleeting and fragmented. He was a child, running through the gardens of Seacliff Hall, his laughter ringing out. The governor stood on the veranda, his smile warm, his eyes filled with an affection that now made Regulus’s stomach churn.

And then it came — the signature torrent of emotions. Hate – so much hate, coursing through him searingly and relentlessly, deep and primal, branded into every pore of his body. Hate for the ultimate betrayal – the most ultimate, the most painful betrayal. Hate for the way he had been betrayed, by him, but also by himself. And rage – blinding and raw, clawing at him, unbidden and all-consuming. And

sadness – the aching sadness, the loneliness, the isolation clawing at his heart. Oh, how lonely he'd felt. How lonely he'd felt for years and years. And still, still – there was pity too. Pity for what had happened. For what would come of him. And the affection – the warmth, the love he'd felt from him, for him. Tangled with all of it, tangled with the hate, the fear, the pity.

His stomach twisted violently.

No. He couldn't let Isa see this. He wouldn't.

With every ounce of strength he possessed, Regulus forced her back, shoving her presence out of his mind with a raw, desperate burst of willpower.

The fog cleared abruptly, dissipating as Isa retreated.

She lowered her wand, her expression unreadable. If she had recognised the governor in his memories, she didn't let it show – she didn't comment on anything she'd seen, much to Regulus's relief.

"Okay. The most important part is blocking Potter out. Don't strain yourself trying to block everything else. Do you know who's going to… do it during the Easter holidays?"

Regulus, still catching his breath, managed a dry, bitter reply.

"Well, we all know who's dying to do the honours."

Isa's eyes darkened. "Bellatrix."

He nodded, running a trembling hand over his temple. Just some minutes in, and he was already exhausted.

"Yes. It might be the Dark Lord too. Or Mother, though that's less likely. Maybe Lucius."

Isa hesitated, her voice cautious, her brown eyes flickering away from him to the room.

"And they… they all know about… your governor?"

Regulus's throat tightened, and he flinched.

So she had recognised him.

"All the family, for sure," he said, his voice hoarse. "I think the Dark

Lord knows as well."

Isa took a steadying breath, her shoulders tense.

"Okay. Well… then… we don't have time to restructure everything. No time to block out every uncomfortable memory. And with a bit of luck, they'll focus on recent things. The mission is their goal."

She met his eyes now, her tone hardening with determination. "So. Focus on blocking out Potter. The priority, the first thing, is Potter."

Her words echoed in his mind. The first thing is Potter.

"Again," she said resolutely, lifting her wand.

Regulus swallowed hard, bracing himself as the spell hit once more.

The first thing is Potter.

Unbidden, his mind flashed to that evening with Potter in their dorm in Beauxbatons, lying in his arms in his bed, when Potter had asked all kinds of questions about Regulus's history with girls as Regulus had tried to steer the conversation into another direction.

Potter's brow furrowed, realising dawning as his eyes widened. "Wait—am I—"

"Don't," Regulus warned sharply. "Don't make a big thing out of this."

Potter, as to be expected, grinned like he'd just won the Quidditch cup. "I'm your only one."

But he wasn't his only one – Potter would never be his first, would never be his only one. No one would be his first except for *him* . *He* had marked him. No matter how hard he tried, how much time passed, how fiercely he tried to give his heart, his body, his everything to someone else – it wouldn't matter. Because Regulus would always be partially his. A part of him would always belong to the governor.

And then the flashbacks hit him, swift and unrelenting.

The first one was a memory buried so deep it had dissolved into the farthest, farthest recesses of his mind, so far to the edges that he had totally forgotten about its existence. Him, as a young boy, too young to understand anything from anything, in his bed, laboured breathing near him, the weight of a body beside him. The voice, thick with arousal, making his skin crawl. And how he didn't understand – didn't

comprehend the sounds, didn't understand the heat of the hand sliding beneath the waistband of his pajamas. How he hadn't known what was happening, what he was supposed to do when he felt the fingers pressing against him, moving behind him, entering him.

The memory slammed into him like a curse. Fiercely. Violently. Mercilessly.

He froze, his mind flooded with so many emotions. Shock. Shame. Fury.

The sharp, biting anguish of Isa witnessing it, the unbearable vulnerability of having her see what he'd buried so deep he thought he'd erased it.

And then, the dam burst.

He smelled the sweat on his body – *wonderful boy* – he saw robes dropping to the floor – he heard the belts of pants opening – he saw his governor, laughing and hugging him, *did you like swimming today, Regulus?* – oh, and he felt the pain, the pain shooting through his body, raw and merciless, to every pore, every vein – and he saw himself hiding in the closet in the drawing room, afraid but also proud, proud that he was, for once, standing up for himself, hiding, not giving in – and he felt the fear as the governor entered the room, calling his name, asking him where he was – '*ah, I will go check on Sirius then, see if he's sleeping already*' – and he felt the defeat, the numbing and deafening defeat as he climbed out of the closet, knowing that there was no way out, there was no returning – no, not Sirius – and he felt the shame as his Mother berated him for falling asleep during dinner, a dinner party with important guests – but he was *so*, so tired – '*You will go upstairs, now! Your governor will attend to you!*' –

Isa retreated, breaking the connection.

Complete, utter silence followed.

Regulus stood frozen, the room blurring around him as he caught the shock in Isa's eyes. Her brown eyes, filled with shock and pain. It was unbearable.

He didn't know what to do, how to cope with the emotions flooding him. He felt all of it – all of the things he'd felt in his memories, tangled with everything he felt now. He couldn't detangle them – couldn't distinguish between the memories and his present feelings.

Oh, and he was *so* weak. So, *so* weak. It was never going to work.

They were going to kill him.

He couldn't bring himself to look at her, couldn't bear to see the expression on her face any longer. He turned away and paced the room, his movements unsteady, his hands trembling, feeling nauseous. His breath hitched as he shook his head, almost as if trying to physically shake off the memories.

"Just – just give me a minute, okay?" he whispered, excusing himself as he avoided her gaze.

When he finally glanced back at her, his stomach dropped. Isa was crying. Silently. Tears slipping down her cheeks as she stood there, lost in shock.

"Perhaps this was a bad idea," Regulus said, swallowing.

Shit, he was so stupid.

Of course she'd see all of it. His mind was so weak – and he'd been completely overwhelmed, completely taken off guard by that first memory, the one he'd forgotten about – so it had opened everything. Of course she'd see all of him. All the sick things that had happened to him, all the revolting things he had allowed to happen.

How could he think she'd be able to handle it?

He could hardly handle it himself. And he had lived through it. Had gotten used to it.

Isa blinked rapidly, brushing her tears away with the back of her hand. "No, Reg. It's the only way. We have no choice. I'm sorry — I shouldn't cry. This isn't… about me."

Her words only made him feel worse. He could hardly manage his own emotions, let alone hers, but her tears pulled at something deep inside him.

"No, it's okay, Ies," he said hesitantly, his voice soft, uneven. "I… I guess it's a bit much."

She shook her head, exhaling shakily. "No, I just… I just didn't know the extent of it."

Silence fell between them, heavy and suffocating.

Regulus closed his eyes, rubbing his temples. He was so fucking, bloody tired.

Isa's voice broke through the silence, trembling but firm.

"Okay. Let's take a break. Let's… let's just take a break."

*****

The only – truly the only – upside of this was that Isa had at least seen the worst. It couldn't get worse than this. And this was a good thing, because Regulus had forgotten that in the beginning phase, the mental barriers, the walls, often got weaker before they grew stronger.

So, Isa saw much. *Too* much.

She saw Regulus and Potter chasing each other in the snow at Potter Manor, Regulus dodging Potter's assault of white, cold snowballs.

"Britain's most promising Chaser, my arse — you can't even throw a proper snowball, Potter!"

"Oh, you're one to talk!" Potter shot back, narrowly missing Regulus with a counter-attack. "That aim's nothing to brag about, Black!"

And she saw, too, how they'd fallen onto the ground, how Regulus had his hand braced on either side of Potter's head, how he had leaned down and kissed him. How he'd felt Potter's cold hands on the skin of his back, how Potter's lips had tasted, laughing against his mouth, how Potter had gasped as Regulus's tongue grazed his bottom lip.

And she saw him behind the piano at Potter Manor, playing that familiar tune while Potter burst in laughter.

"Never, never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I'd see Regulus Black sitting in Potter Manor, playing a song by ABBA."

And then, also at Potter Manor, how he'd dragged Sirius bleeding body through the fireplace, and how he'd screamed for help – and how Potter had come down the stairs, completely in shock, completely appalled by the sight of his best friend bleeding to death in front of him. And how Regulus had begged, begged him not to tell anyone it was him who had brought him there.

"You can't go back there," Potter said. He rose from Sirius's body as well,

and clutched Regulus's arm. "You can't go back to her."

Regulus, startled at Potter's warm touch after feeling the cold of his brother's body, looked at Potter's hand and then slowly tilted his head to take in Potter's brown, worried eyes.

"I'll have to, Potter," he said with a wry smile. "I am the spare."

And she felt how he missed his brother – how, despite having prepared himself for the day he'd leave, despite hating him for his stupid ideology and hating him for leaving him alone and hating him for loving the Potters more and hating him for being so bloody perfect for his role as the Black heir and completely squandering it – how, despite all of this, he missed him and loved him truly, deeply.

"When you're afraid," he'd whispered, "look at these stars. You see? This one is me, Sirius, and this one is you, Regulus. Just like we're always there in the sky, we'll always be together here."

And then followed the evening of Regulus's first kiss with Potter – when they'd lain sprawled out on the pouffes in the Charms classroom, drinking from the bottle of Firewhiskey and when Regulus had found out about the process of making numbing cream, and the lengths Potter had gone through for Regulus by making it.

"No – but you needed help…" Potter trailed off, looking at his hands. "And well – I wanted to see you fly, too." He looked up slowly, his gaze steady and intense, making its way all the way through Regulus's eyes right into his soul. "You know, when you fly – that is a little bit like magic too.

And she caught too, how he'd lain next to Potter in the dorm, how Regulus had been on the verge of crying when he'd heard Potter's words.

"On the contrary — you're so gifted. And so bloody beautiful."

"Horrible, wrecking things have happened to you, but that doesn't mean you are bad or that you are broken—"

"No — never think of yourself that way, Reg. You're good, so good."

And then, the same words, repeated by Mrs. Potter.

"You are good, Regulus," she said, her tone unwavering. "I know that. Otherwise, my son would never have fallen for you. Hold on to that goodness, no matter what. It will see you through."

Sometimes she saw enough to make sense of what she was seeing, of what was happening before he could block her out and steer her to something else instead. He'd steer her to memories allowed for all to see – him dancing with her at the balcony at Dreadmoor Keep, him laughing with Evan and Barty in their dorm, duelling with Mulciber at Black Manor, memories of him and Cissy picnicing in the garden.

Other times, she glimpsed only fragments — fleeting, disjointed flashes of his memories, his emotions slipping through. And sometimes he grew stronger, too, managing to push her out when she clawed her way into particularly sensitive places.

So when the memory surfaced — the one where Potter had touched him for the first time, each movement making him rise and rise and rise — Regulus was fairly certain she hadn't caught much more than Potter's whispered words:

"Still good?" Potter whispered, his voice low, rough with desire and concern.

And he was pretty sure, too, that when the memory emerged of him confessing to Potter that he fancied him, when his hands had slowly trailed down Potter's body, his lips following, savouring every shiver and sharp inhale — he was pretty sure that she had caught only fragments before he managed to block her out.

"Shh."

"Oh – you're – oh, you're–"

And also when his mind somehow returned to that memory, but later, he managed to block her out from the bare skin, Potter's moans, and managed to let her witness nothing more than him leaning into Potter's ear, and whispering the ultimate, unguarded words –

"Come for me, James."

Still, although he managed to block her out here and there, she always found her way back through his barriers — sometimes needing to push hard, other times slipping in almost effortlessly. He steered her away occasionally, but once she clawed onto something, it was nearly impossible to drive her out completely; she always caught glimpses, always saw just enough to unsettle him. He knew he needed more strength, more willpower, more determination to block her out — but she was so strong, and his mind was *so* weak, *so* polluted.

The realisation that his mind was still strong – the flicker of hope — ironically, came when she'd found her way into one of the memories he dreaded her seeing the most. The shower in the Come and Go Room.

With all his might, he tried to push her away, to shove her out of the memory of Potter standing in front of him, completely naked and aroused, to drive her out at the feeling of Potter pressed against him in the shower.

"Tell me — tell me what you think about when you touch yourself."

"You — you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Again, the memory was fragmented, disjointed by his desperate efforts to drive her out. The full scene refused to unfold, but flashes broke through – bare skin, the feeling of overwhelming arousal and longing, Potter's lips brushing against his neck — and then the image of him kneeling down, his hands trailing over Regulus's thighs, lips hovering and—

A sudden, visceral surge of panic overtook him. Regulus gathered every ounce of rage, shame and embarrassment, pulling it into a burning ball of defiance and hurling it back at her. The fog thickened, his thoughts clouding into a wall of raw emotion and force of will. Then, with a final mental shove, he threw her from his mind, so fiercely that it shattered the connection and broke the spell.

Isa staggered back physically, her eyes wide as she clutched the edge of a table nearby to steady herself. Her face was flushed, her breathing shallow. She looked shocked and unsure – shocked by Regulus's sudden outburst of willpower, probably shocked by what she could piece together of the scene, too, and unsure how to respond to it.

Regulus, trembling and pale, could hardly look at her. The silence in the room was deafening, their mutual discomfort palpable in the air.

He flinched, taking a deep breath before breaking the silence, his voice low.

"What… what did you see… last?"

Isa hesitated, her mouth opening and closing as though searching for the right words. Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of crimson, and she

focused her gaze anywhere but on him.

“It was… fragments. Nothing whole.” Her tone was uncharacteristically halting.

Regulus tensed, his throat dry. “What fragments did you see, Nott?”

Isa inhaled sharply, then forced herself to meet his gaze. Her expression was a mix of discomfort and cautious honesty.

“I saw… I saw you and Potter in the shower. Flashes of… you together. His lips… your neck.” She cleared her throat, her voice growing softer, almost apologetic. “And then… him… kneeling.”

Regulus groaned, low and suffering, as he leaned against the wall for support. He dropped his head back, looking at the ceiling to avoid her gaze at all costs.

“I… I kicked you out before you saw more, right?” His voice was tight, tinged with desperation and hope.

Isa nodded quickly, avoiding his gaze too. “Yes. You — before anything else.” She bit her lip and added tentatively, “I’m sorry, Reg. I didn’t… didn’t know what I was seeing before it was too late. I would’ve retreated myself if you hadn’t already… kicked me out—”

Regulus sighed heavily, nodding. “I know, Ies.”

Isa’s expression softened slightly, and she offered a small, encouraging smile. “Good thing, though — you have a lot of power in your mind, still. We can work with that. That’s a good thing, Reg, a really good thing.”

Regulus, still horrified at Isa having witnessed even fragments of the scene, nodded faintly, his voice flat. “Yeah, I guess.”

Isa cleared her throat and glanced away, her tone gentle. “Let’s… let’s grab some food, alright? We’ll try again tonight.”

*****

Isa did everything she could to keep things normal between them, despite having seen, having witnessed, having felt so many deeply personal things. It was widely known that Regulus was a very private person, especially when it came to the sort of things that Isa had seen in his memories. He never spoke of his governor; all that Isa knew

about him, she had overheard accidentally from her parents. And he never talked about intimacy, or love, or snogging or any of that, and now she had seen it all in his head. He never discussed his brother either, nor his vivid memories of their childhood or his complicated feelings about him now, and she'd seen, she'd felt all of it in his head.

Fully aware of how sensitive it all was, Isa went to great lengths to act normal, to preserve their usual dynamic, and Regulus had to admit that it was working surprisingly well. If someone had told him days ago that Isa would know all that she now knew, he would have died of shame, completely unable to face her. But no — there they were, even on that Monday morning after their first session in the Room of Requirement, and the air between them was oddly and refreshingly normal.

Regulus had to admit, though, that it was pretty weird to realise that now two people in the castle, apart from himself and Potter, knew. Isa and the werewolf. The analysing, prying looks from Lupin had already been unnerving, but with Isa's sharp eyes added to the mix, the situation felt even more bizarre.

It was still quite early, and Regulus and Isa were the only ones from their circle already up and about at the Slytherin table; unlike their friends, Isa and Regulus didn't have a free block after breakfast. Instead, they were stuck sitting through two long hours of Runes after their toast and eggs.

He knew Potter entered the Great Hall before he even saw him, as if the energy in the room shifted, notifying him. Regulus looked subtly up from his plate and realised that he was only followed by that daft Pettigrew bloke – Sirius and Lupin were conspicuously absent, at least sparing him the sharp glances from the werewolf. Potter looked handsome as always – hair an untamed mess, his stride confident and the signature smirk across his face. It didn't go past Regulus, though, that the smirk didn't quite reach his eyes.

Regulus pretended not to notice his entrance and forced himself to focus on his plate, buttering his toast in an attempt to cover the strange combination of a fluttering heart and an ominous lump in his throat as a result of seeing him.

He wasn't oblivious, though, and very clearly felt Isa's sharp eyes darting between him and Potter – watching, evaluating. He could hardly blame her – she *had* seen Potter in a rather different light, after all.

Regulus managed to ignore all of it – Potter's presence, Isa's gaze – through most of breakfast, but at some point, when he reached for a slice of toast, he allowed his eyes to lift, just for a second.

His eyes interlocked with Potter's instantly.

He noticed the series of emotions flashing across Potter's face – a tense expression at first, his brows furrowed in something close to anger, then it shifting into something more vulnerable, something close to hurt, and then, ultimately, his gaze softening. A flash of affection flickered across Potter's eyes and Regulus's heart tugged in response. Potter truly had no idea how deep he'd settled in Regulus's heart.

And he tried to compose himself, to hold it back, but he couldn't help the small smile tugging at his lips, nor the warmth in his gaze for just a second as he looked at him.

However, the spell was quickly broken by a dramatic groan from Isa.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she whispered, loud enough for only him to hear. "You're completely smitten, you loser."

Regulus jolted, choking on the piece of toast he'd just bitten into. He coughed violently, shooting her a murderous glare as he struggled to clear his airway.

"Shut up, Nott," he hissed, his voice rasping.

Isa was entirely unbothered by his unease as she burst into laughter, hard and loud, while Regulus rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Once her laughter subsided, Isa's expression turned serious. She leaned in slightly, clearly swallowing her discomfort.

"You know what you've got to do, though, right?"

Regulus hesitated, his throat tightening. But he nodded, his movements stiff.

Isa's tone softened.

"You really can't let this go on while we're… working on your mind. It's like pushing water uphill with a rake."

Regulus sighed.

"I know."

*****

Regulus had no idea, had no clue how to end things with Potter. His mind raced with explanations, with scenarios, with made-up reasons, but he just couldn't get the words over his lips. His head, his mind knew perfectly well he had to do it soon, as soon as possible even, but neither his heart nor his gut wanted to align.

Regulus was reminded, once again, why he wasn't placed in Gryffindor when he, rather than affronting the situation, deviced all kinds of creative ways to slip away from Potter, to dodge him after practice and to steer clear of him in the corridors, at meals or on the sprawling Hogwarts grounds.

Almost a week passed, filled with classes, practice and hours and hours of having his mind probed, when help came from a very unexpected source. Sure, in hindsight, he would've wanted things to end in a different manner, but when the opportunity presented itself, forced itself on him, he seized it – because, well, he didn't see any other way out.

It started with Regulus trying — not very subtly, unfortunately — to outwalk Potter on his way from the Great Hall to the Come and Go Room. It was just after lunch on Saturday, and Regulus had been doing a formidable job of avoiding Potter all week. He knew Potter wanted to talk, wanted to address the row they'd had in the locker room and the whole situation with the werewolf, but Regulus was very reluctant to find himself alone in a room with Potter for the obvious reasons – it would either result in them ending things or result in some scenario involving too few clothes.

As he walked quickly up the stairs toward the Come and Go Room, Regulus pretended not to notice the familiar footsteps following close behind. Potter's footsteps quickened as he tried to match Regulus's pace.

They had reached the fourth-floor landing when Potter finally managed to catch up and clearly had enough.

"You're avoiding me," Potter said, his voice firm.

Regulus froze, glancing around uncomfortably.

"No, I'm not," he replied tersely.

An odd silence stretched.

"Don't pretend I'm daft, Black," Potter shot sharply, breaking the silence between them as they stood still on the fourth-floor landing. "Even Selwyn would've noticed."

Regulus flinched and sighed as he quickly glanced over his shoulder to make sure the corridor was still empty.

"We can't do this here," he shot, his voice low and sharp.

Potter's brow furrowed. "Alright," he nodded. "Seventh floor then."

Regulus hesitated – Isa was waiting for him there, for another round of Occlumency practice. Would they even be able to enter the room with Isa already inside?

He shook off the thought and gave a stiff nod. He could always ask her to leave for a bit; she knew what it was about anyway.

"Fine. But we can't walk there together."

Merlin knew how many people knew of the room and used it for particular… delicate matters. Being seen with Potter walking toward that stretch of wall on the seventh floor – no bloody way.

Potter rolled his eyes. "I'll throw on my cloak."

Without another word, Potter threw the Invisibility Cloak over himself, vanishing from view. Regulus continued his ascent to the seventh floor with a quick pace, thinking how odd it was to hear Potter's feet softly behind him but not seeing them.

He was almost on the sixth floor when – well – fate really, *really* decided to screw with him.

"Regulus," a familiar voice sounded from behind him.

Regulus froze, cursing silently.

Of course. Of course, of all people, of all places and of all times, *Severus* would appear now on the landing of the bloody sixth floor.

Regulus felt *very* awkward exchanging words with his friend Severus, one of the biggest foes of the bloke he happened to have fallen in love with, and who was – to make matters even worse – hidden underneath a bloody invisibility cloak nearby.

He could actually feel Potter's presence some yards away.

What a disaster.

Severus's sharp eyes flicked over him, curiosity etched onto his face. "Where are you off to?"

Regulus cleared his throat awkwardly, forcing a casual shrug. "Just… doing some stuff."

Brilliant. Best bloody credible excuse ever.

Severus arched an eyebrow, and then his confused face changed into a weirdly knowing one. Weird – because Regulus had no clue what Severus thought he himself knew, or what Regulus had apparently missed.

The answer came soon enough.

"Oh — you… have a task then?"

Task?

Regulus blinked, utterly confused by this entire situation.

In all honesty, it *was* a lot to deal with; he hadn't slept well for ages, had his entire mind and soul spread out for his best friends to poke through the majority of the day and now he'd managed to run into Severus Snape in the weirdest part of the castle with James Potter hidden under an invisibility cloak breathing down his neck.

Could life just give him a break for once?

"What?"

Severus raised another brow. "You know," he said, like Regulus was missing something obvious, "for the Dark Lord."

The reaction was immediate.

Regulus's heart began to hammer wildly, his breath catching in his throat. The blood drained from his face.

No. Not here. Not now. Not with Potter only yards away.

He could practically *feel* Potter's mixed confusion and growing alarm behind him.

No. *No*.

“No—” Regulus stammered, his voice uneven as blind panic surged through him. “No, I—”

Severus shot him a small smile. “Sorry, I know you can’t talk about it,” he continued, his tone assuring. “You made that clear over the holidays—”

How could Severus be so stupid?

Didn’t he realise that at Hogwarts the bloody *walls* had ears?

Or that secret lovers could hide under invisibility cloaks, for that matter?

“Severus—” Regulus began urgently, his tone sharp.

But Severus pressed on. “Please, don’t try to blow me off again,” he said, his voice dipping lower. “I know you’re in direct contact with the Dark Lord. I know you’ve joined them. Just…” He hesitated, then gave a faint, hopeful smile. “Just put in a good word for me, will you?”

Regulus felt the words slam into him like an actual blow. His heart dropped.

Behind him, there was a sharp, unmistakable gasp.

Fuck.

Severus seemed completely oblivious to the pure horror etched to Regulus’s face as he gave him a kind nod and then strolled down the stairs.

Fuck.

How was he going to talk himself out of this?

Regulus stood frozen to the spot, staring into the distance in shock. The silence seemed to stretch endlessly.

And then, with a rustle of fabric, Potter tore off the cloak.

Regulus didn’t turn to face him, waiting instead for Potter to step into his view.

Potter’s face was a mix of plain hurt, anger and utter shock.

“You work for him?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Regulus flinched, unable to find his voice.

Potter stepped closer, his words trembling. “You work for the Dark Lord, Reg?”

Still, Regulus said nothing.

Potter’s voice rose, sharp with shock and betrayal. “You’re a Death Eater?”

Regulus exhaled sharply, utterly confused by Potter’s shock.

He was a traditionalist to the bone, interested in politics, the Heir of the Noble House of Black — how much more did Potter need to add the pieces together?

“Come on, James,” Regulus said, barely suppressing a scoff. “Why so surprised? You know it’s my destiny — it’s set in stone. Besides, there’s no Slytherin who doesn’t sympathise with the Revolution.”

Potter staggered back slightly, as if the words struck him. “You’re… *in direct contact* with the Dark Lord?” His voice faltered.

Regulus’s silence was apparently enough of an answer.

“I can’t believe this,” Potter whispered. “You’re… you’re a Death Eater.”

Regulus was utterly confused by this exchange — how, in Merlin’s name, could it have come as such a surprise to Potter?

And then it dawned on him.

Potter truly hadn’t known, hadn’t understood. Truly hadn’t comprehended the extent to which Regulus was involved in the Revolution. Hadn’t comprehended the extent to which the Revolution’s ideas aligned with Regulus.

Regulus had always assumed, no, *known* that Potter was a modernist. A Squib right sympathiser, a blood traitor, a supporter of Mudbloods.

Regulus had always known. And had fallen in love with him despite this. And, if he were truly honest with himself, perhaps even fallen in love with him a bit *because* of this – just a tiny bit, but still. It was just part of Potter’s boundless optimism; the idea that all people were the same, should do all the same, should be allowed to do all the same. There was something optimistic about it; though unrealistic, too –

unrealistic to ignore generations of magical power, to ignore that there was a reason why the world worked like it did, to ignore the growing threat of magic dying out. But it didn't come from a bad place – it was just naive.

Potter's world vision had always been perfectly clear to Regulus, and, although faulty at its core, it was one of the things that made Potter who he was – optimistic and charming. And one of the reasons why Regulus had fallen for him.

But that clearly wasn't the case for Potter – he had fallen for Regulus based on false assumptions. He'd thought Regulus was different than he truly was; and now that he'd found out who he indeed truly was, he was repulsed, shocked, disgusted.

The realisation hit him hard and relentlessly.

A flicker of hurt washed over Regulus's face before he managed to compose himself. He sighed and let his features harden into a glare, his eyes cold and distant.

"Again – *why* are you so surprised, Potter?" Regulus asked in a low, clipped tone. "You know I'm a traditionalist – I'm the heir to the Black family – *what* exactly did you think?"

Potter looked like Regulus had punched him squarely in the face. He took a step back. "I thought you were good. That you're… you're not like them." His voice cracked as he continued, louder, angrier. "You hug *muggles* , for fuck's sake!"

Regulus let out a bitter laugh. "Potter, if you think this is about hating Muggles then you're so *bloody* misinformed."

Potter's face twisted with fury. He shook his head violently, his movements sharp and restless, like he couldn't stand still. "No, Reg, you – you're fucking delusional!"

The silence that followed was thick and suffocating.

Potter took another step back, his voice dropping to a whisper, trembling with raw emotion. "They… they were right."

Regulus didn't drop his icy glare, but deep down wondered who Potter was referring to.

Sirius and Lupin, probably – telling Potter all the tales about Regulus

being bad news.

“And us,” Potter whispered, his voice on the verge of breaking, his eyes clearly holding back the tears. “You and me – was that even real?”

Regulus swallowed hard, his throat tight.

He truly didn’t want to do it – didn’t want to say it. Because it wasn’t true, no part of it was true, not even in the slightest. Because Potter and him – it was perhaps the most genuine thing that had ever happened to him, the truest thing that he’d witnessed. The most pure, the most raw and unfiltered thing that he’d had the honour of being part of.

But Potter’s shock, Potter’s disgust at finding out who Regulus truly was – it lingered. And, more important, Regulus knew this was the card.

The card he needed to finally put an end to him and Potter.

So often had he explained to Potter that they couldn’t continue this because it was dangerous, because they’d end up hurt – and Potter would shove it away, would find his way back into Regulus’s heart, would know all the things he had to say and all the things he had to do to prolong what had blossomed between them.

But, this – this might actually work. If Potter didn’t *want* him anymore – if the reason wasn’t an external factor, but rather intrinsic – well, there was no reason to continue this, then.

So, Regulus took in a deep breath, closed his eyes briefly before shooting Potter the most icy, penetrating glare he could conjure, and then, with a voice as steady as he could muster–

“No, it wasn’t.”

*****

The following two weeks passed in a blur of determination and focus. Regulus did everything in his power not to think of Potter – he threw himself into every task with resolve, he sat with his back to the rest of the Hall during meals, focused on his own drills during practice, and teamed up with others from the Quidditch team whenever necessary. The more he avoided him, the more he managed to shove thoughts of Potter behind his mental barriers with relentless exercises, the easier it

actually became.

It was strange – having to mentally force Potter out of his mind over and over, to relegate him to the periphery, seemed to dull the sharpness of his presence even when his mind was open. It was as though training himself to contain Potter's memory was slowly teaching him to forget it altogether — or at least bury it somewhere very unreachable.

His friends had in the meantime picked up on the fact that Regulus and Isa were working on something – they'd eat most meals in the Kitchen on the weekends, and spend all their free time with each other, away from their friends. They had all taken the same guess as Severus – assuming that they were working on something secretive for the Dark Lord. They never asked, though, but Regulus could see it in the anticipatory and eager eyes of his friends whenever he snuck off with Isa.

Three weeks in, Regulus was starting to get the hang of it – he could always keep Potter out of his mind during Isa's initial attempts. He'd fortified his defenses enough that even when Isa tried to slip through his thoughts subtly, Potter's face didn't immediately resurface.

But it wasn't perfect. When Isa really pushed — when she came at him with force, prying and searching — his defences crumbled, making the memories leak though. And especially when she used associations, flashes of Potter's voice, laugh, touch would resurface.

If Bellatrix were to do it – she would poke and prod at every corner of his mind just for the sheer pleasure of finding something to use against him – he would still, even on a good day, be utterly fucked.

On the third weekend, Regulus found himself with Isa in his dorm – a change from their usual meeting place on the seventh floor. They would both go to sleep soon as they'd agreed to start fresh the next morning. All of their friends were still in the common room, laughing and chatting, as they could sleep in the next day. Isa was perched cross-legged on the edge of Regulus's bed, combing through the Occlumency book she'd given him just one more time before she'd undoubtedly go back to her own dorm to sleep. The book had become almost a sacred text to her – the pages were dog-eared and the pages were lined with notes.

Regulus, meanwhile, was tidying up his part of the dormitory – with his time and attention consumed by other things, it had become

uncharacteristically untidy. He was in the process of putting clothes away in his closet as Isa sighed.

“It’s so frustrating,” she complained, her tone laced with exasperation. She didn’t look up from the book as she continued. “You can’t do anything about it. Once that kind of soul connection is made, you’re bloody screwed, aren’t you?”

Regulus paused, glancing over his shoulder at her, but she seemed to be talking more to herself than to him. She flipped another page with an impatient snap.

“Layering,” she mused, her voice quiet but thoughtful, “Layering is truly the only option, isn’t it? Just bury them under other soul-altering connections. Make other connections stronger…”

Regulus wasn’t paying much attention. He hummed vaguely in response, more focused on neatly folding a pair of robes.

But then Isa went quiet. Too quiet.

Regulus frowned, sensing a shift in the air. He turned slightly, catching her awkward hesitation in the corner of his eyes.

“What?” he asked, his tone wary.

Isa hesitated, fidgeting slightly with the corner of the book. “Can I ask you a… brutally personal question, Reg?”

His brow furrowed, immediately feeling anxious.

“Err — I… guess?” he said slowly, bracing himself for whatever was coming.

Isa took a breath, her voice cautious. “Are you— are you still a virgin, Reg?”

The question hit him like a slap. He did *not* see that one coming.

He froze mid-motion, one hand clutching the fabric he’d been folding. For a moment, he was utterly still, the question hanging in the air heavily. Then, almost mechanically, he resumed folding, his focus clearly on the task of folding to avoid looking at her.

“I’ve never slept with a girl,” he said finally, his voice awkward and clipped.

Isa nodded slightly, as if expecting the answer.

“And… with… Potter?” she asked, her voice softer now.

Regulus’s hands faltered, the fabric slipping slightly in his grip. He swallowed hard, his face heating up.

“No,” he said quickly, his voice barely above a whisper. “No… we haven’t done… that.”

Why did she want to discuss this? Wasn’t poking in his mind every waking minute already enough of an intrusion?

The silence that followed was utterly uncomfortable. Regulus risked a fleeting glance at Isa’s face, only to find her studying him with a mixture of curiosity and something he couldn’t quite place. He immediately returned his attention to the clothes, busying himself with tidying the place to avoid looking at her.

Then Isa straightened, her expression shifting into something resolute.

“I have an idea,” she said firmly.

Regulus shot her an incredulous look, his eyebrows rising.

“Merlin, your conversations jump from one place to the other, don’t they?” he said, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

Isa could be *such* a girl sometimes – always jumping from one topic to the other and assuming that everyone followed her train of thought, which, frankly, only the other girls in the room could. Like they had some kind of code.

Just like now; jumping from soul-layering, to virginity, to–

No.

Regulus turned slowly to fully face her - the movement incredibly slow as a dawning realisation crept over him. His eyes narrowed, his tone dropping to something low and dangerous.

“What are you implying, Nott?”

“You know perfectly well what I’m implying.”

Regulus’s voice hardened. “No. No fucking way, Nott.”

Isa's expression didn't falter. "Look, you only have a little over two weeks—"

"Almost three," Regulus cut in sharply, his voice rising. "And I'll be stronger by then."

Isa shook her head, her tone calm but firm. "Probably not strong enough. You know this is so much more effective. So much more efficient."

"No," Regulus snapped, his eyes blazing. "Don't even think about it."

Isa held up her hands slightly, her voice softening. "Just… sleep on it for a night. Or a few, perhaps."

Regulus's voice was loud now, heated and absolute. "No, Isa. No. It's not happening."

The silence that followed was almost deafening.

Then, his voice turned quiet but incredibly sharp.

"I am *not* sleeping with you."

Chapter End Notes

> So, a lot is happening... This might've been the hardest chapter to write so far, at least technically (keeping the flow with the memories etc.). Curious what you guys think, as always.

Chapter 20: Of Firsts & Timings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two days passed during which Isa tried to address the topic and Regulus completely ignored it. They practised in the Come and Go Room as usual, but they didn't talk when not absolutely necessary.

Yes, Regulus knew that Isa was right – at least technically – but her proposal was also absurd, bizarre and naive at best. After all their research, in Damascus over the summer and now on the seventh floor of the castle, he knew that, indeed, layering was the most effective way to compartmentalise the mind. One of the first things they had learned when they dove into the subject of Occlumency was the nature of soul-altering forces; profound, fierce emotions like love and grief that fundamentally changed the soul. In addition to these emotions, there were acts that directly affected the soul; such as deep intimacy – the joining of souls – or taking a life – the taking of a soul.

Once under the influence of such forces, the soul became more open to intrusion, more easy to access. And once a soul-changing connection had been made — whether through intimacy or killing — it was nearly impossible to erase that person or event from the mind, the connections becoming indelibly etched into the fabric of the soul.

Of course, soul-altering emotions like love or grief weren't as difficult to manage, at least for Regulus; with enough practice, mental walls could be built, strengthened, and maintained. Especially for Regulus, these were manageable – for he was already an exquisite Occlumens. He knew he could've already surpassed even Bellatrix if he'd shared her lack of emotional inhibitions. But he didn't.

Regulus had come very adept at pretending to the outside world he was cool, indifferent and cold –but he was more like his brother than people realised. He was a fiercely emotional person – he felt deeply, thoroughly, and he loved deeply and fiercely. He'd loved his governor, like he'd always loved Sirius, like he felt so much love for his friends, for Cissy and Isa in particular. Still, despite this, Regulus was an excellent Occlumens – fairly better than most in his family, already at this age.

The biggest challenge for him wasn't posed by these soul-altering

forces, but rather by the soul-affecting deeds. It was extremely hard to truly, really push Potter and all that was associated with him from his mind, no matter how hard he tried. The most common solution to this was time – to practice and practice, to give the soul time to gradually settle. Another effective way was layering; forming new, equally powerful soul-altering connections to bury the old ones. You could, for example, kill another person if you wanted to bury the one murder to the depth of your mind. You could, also, find that intimate connection with someone just to bury the one you've established with someone else.

Isa's proposal wasn't baseless – they were best friends, they already had a very deep, intimate connection. Regulus knew that Isa, apart from the physical aspect, knew him best, better than anyone in the entire world. And Regulus knew that it was true, too, the other way around. Taking their connection to a deeper level through intimacy would, in theory, absolutely work to smother the connection he had made with Potter.

But it was ridiculous. A ridiculous, naive and a pointless idea.

Because they weren't doing it.

Regulus stormed through the dimly lit Slytherin common room, his jaw tight, shoulders stiff, and his long strides a clear signal that he was very irritated. As he quickly made his way to the dormitory, the curious and quite uncomfortable glances from Barty, Evan and Avery — lounging in their part of the common room – barely registered.

Isa entered the common room only second later, equally determined and unbothered by their friends' curious stares. She swept past the trio without a glance and followed Regulus up the stairs.

"Just — just— hear me out, Reg," Isa said, her voice firm but not harsh, as she walked into the dorm and closed the door.

Regulus whirled around to face her, his grey eyes blazing. "Bloody hell – *why* are you so stubborn? Let it go , Nott!"

Isa didn't flinch.

"Look, if you've thought about it and it's a no, okay. Fine. But have you even *thought* about it?"

Regulus threw his hands up, exasperated. "What's there to think about!?"

She took a step closer, her voice rising in urgency. “You have less than two weeks, Regulus. Less than two weeks. We’re *nearly* there, but we won’t make it in this amount of time. You do realise — it’s a matter of *life and death,* don’t you?”

Regulus sighed deeply, his shoulders sagging as he sat down heavily on the end of his bed. He pressed his hands against his temples in pure exasperation.

Isa took a step closer.

“Why won’t you even *think* about it, Reg?” Isa asked, her tone softening.

A painful, tense silence hung between them until Isa continued. Her voice was quieter now, almost hesitant.

“Is it… on principle? Or is it… because of … me ? ”

Regulus froze, his head snapping up to look at her. He stared at her, completely stunned.

No way. He hadn’t even thought about that. Did Isa really think he didn’t want to do this — because of her? That she wasn’t desirable? That *she* was the problem here?

Regulus rose from the bed, his movements slow, almost reluctant. He shook his head, his voice soft.

“No, of course not, Ies.” He swallowed hard, his throat tight. “No — of course not. You’re… you’re beautiful, Ies.”

Isa blushed, the faint pink on her cheeks tugging at something deep in his chest. Was she *really* that daft?

The truth was, Regulus had never thought about it. He’d never considered the bizarre notion of sleeping with his best friend. Because that’s what they were — best friends. They told each other everything, shared everything, knew each other better than anyone else in the world. Except for this. Except for anything physical or sexual.

Because that wasn’t what this was. He loved her as a friend, not as… that. And the physical part, well, that was part of *that* .

But, yes, of course, she was the closest to… that. She was his closest friend, someone he loved through and through, someone he’d do

anything for — and he knew it was the same the other way around. If he had to sleep with anyone but Potter, the only person it could possibly be was Isa.

Still, the thought made his stomach churn.

“It’s not because you’re… not… desirable or anything,” he said painfully, awkwardly, his eyes darting away from hers. Isa looked away too, the tension between them palpable and almost painful. “It’s just… Ies… how could I do that to you?”

Isa tilted her head, her expression utterly confused. “What?”

Regulus exhaled sharply, his frustration mounting. “C’mon, Ies, you’ve *seen* everything, *felt* everything,” he snapped, his voice rising. How did she *not* understand this? “You’ve seen how it’s completely broken me, fucked me up, poisoned me — why do I have to spell this out for you when you’ve literally *seen*, *felt*, *witnessed* how all that he… did to me… worked out on me?”

Isa sighed, the sound soft and pitiful, her expression shifting to one of deep compassion. “Oh, but Reg,” she whispered, her voice gentle, “it’s not the same as that at all…”

She reached out, taking his hands in hers and guiding him back to sit on the bed beside her. Her touch was warm and gentle, familiar.

“Reg,” she began, her tone measured as she clearly sought for the right words, “what he did to you — that was non-consensual. You were so little, you had no idea what was happening, no voice to say no. He… he was vile. Sick. Absolutely monstrous for subjecting you to that.”

Regulus stared at the wall behind her, unable to meet her eyes, his jaw tightening as her words landed.

“But Reg…” Isa continued softly, tilting her head to try and catch his gaze. She succeeded, their eyes locking even as he did so reluctantly. “If we… if we were to do that, it’d be consensual. It’d be you and me deciding to do it. We’d, you know…” She blushed, looking away briefly before continuing, “…both enjoy it, I assume. It wouldn’t be… like that. It wouldn’t be like that at all.”

A heavy and uncertain silence stretched – Regulus didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to do. His mind was clouded with emotions; confusion, doubt, shame, hope, and some things he couldn’t really

place…

But why, though? Why would she want to do this? Isa wasn't someone who slept around – Regulus was pretty sure the only person she'd ever been with was Davies. He and her were friends, not lovers – so why?

The answer came soon enough.

Isa sighed again, breaking the silence. Her eyes searched his. "And don't you think I'm in danger, Reg?"

Regulus froze.

Isa's voice grew quieter, more vulnerable. "This — what's happening with you — it's a wake-up call. You know my dad, Reg. You know he'd subject me to the same mind-probing if he suspected I was doing anything behind his back. And you know—" Her voice wavered slightly. "You know what he'd do if he found him in my mind."

Regulus's heart sank.

He nodded slowly. "Kill him."

Isa flinched at the word, her shoulders tensing as she looked away.

Regulus sighed. "Alright, just… just let me think about it for a bit, okay?"

Isa smiled faintly and nodded as she rose from the bed. "Okay. I'm going to bed. Sleep tight, Reg."

"You too, Ies," he murmured as she left the room.

*****

As usual these days, the next day it was only Regulus and Isa sitting together at the Slytherin table – the rest still sleeping or making themselves ready for the day in their dorm.

Regulus sat with his head bowed over the Daily Prophet, looking for items that he could connect to the Revolutionaries' activities, while Isa flipped through a Transfiguration book in preparation for class.

They sat in silence, both focused on their respective texts, when Regulus coughed softly.

He pointedly didn't look up but instead flipped a page of the Prophet

as he broke the silence again. “If — if we were going to go… through with it… when would we do it?”

Isa froze, her hand lingering on the edge of a page. She blinked, looking up at him. He didn’t meet her eyes, his gaze fixed firmly on the newspaper in front of him.

A small silence passed between them.

“Well… it depends on the place, too, I guess,” she said, her tone cautious and soft.

Regulus nodded, still not looking up, his eyes scanning the words on the page to give him a reason not to look at her.

The obvious choice was the Come and Go Room; it was private and practical. Still, the idea of doing it there left a sour taste in Regulus’s mouth. It felt like defiling his memory with Potter.

Clearly, Isa thought the same regarding Davies.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat before she continued. “I think… your dorm might be the best option.”

At that, Regulus finally looked up, meeting her gaze. Her brown eyes were wide, vulnerable, and uncertain, searching his for a response. He nodded once, curtly, unable to say anything.

Isa’s voice was quieter now, hesitant. “So… there’s the Slug Party this weekend… everyone will attend, even Crabbe, leaving the dorm empty…”

Regulus swallowed hard. This weekend. One week away. Then another way to focus on practise and testing the barriers.

That could work.

He nodded again, his voice low. “Alright.”

They returned to their respective pages without another word, like the conversation never happened. They didn’t raise the topic again for the rest of the week.

*****

As if life wasn’t busy enough already for him – O.W.L.s looming, awkward practice at least three times a week, avoiding all of Potter’s

hostile glares, spending almost all his free time in the Come and Go Room – Regulus now also had the task of finding every piece of information that could prepare him for what he was to do with Isa over the weekend.

Because, once he had decided that indeed, this was probably the only way out, the only viable option, he had set a single, unshakable condition: she had to enjoy it. Under no circumstance were they doing this without her actually … liking it.

But there came the trouble.

Regulus Black had no bloody clue what he had to do. He hadn't a single shred of experience with a girl — he hadn't even snogged one, for that matter. And the more he thought about it, the more daunting the situation became.

Because – as much as Regulus tried to ignore it, tried *not* to think about it – Isa's only experience, as far as he knew, was with Davies.

Nathaniel bloody Davies.

The handsome seventh-year Ravenclaw Head Boy the entire castle was swooning over, with his stupid paintbrushes, supposedly *divine* eyes and his bloody guitar, and – Regulus was sure – with a lot of talent and tricks in the sexual department.

Regulus's stomach churned every time he thought about the fact he had to match that, had to live up to these expectations, had to reach the bar that Davies had raised so high.

Besides this, Regulus knew perfectly well that this wasn't how it was supposed to happen. People were either grippled by love or by plain lust when they slept together, concealing imperfections and, by standard, making the exchange more pleasurable.

The case of him and Isa would be so much different. It was almost businesslike, strategic; no impulsive outburst of lust, no drunken mistake, nor the exchange of two people deeply and desperately in love with each other. No, just two people embarking on this strange… calculated mission.

And although there were some things at stake for Isa, too, Regulus knew perfectly well they were mostly doing this for him. His case was much more pressing than hers – his was inevitable, her merely probable.

If Isa was going to walk away from this without regret, Regulus needed to know what he was doing. He needed to be prepared.

So, he set to work, trying to gather any information or advice he could on the subject. But it was easier said than done; yes, there was that laughable, stupid and slightly nauseating sex-talk they'd had in third year. Regulus shuddered just thinking about it – all the boys from their year crammed together in the Great Hall while Horace Slughorn, of *all* bloody people — talked about all the ins and outs of sex. And honestly, it was hardly the 'ins and outs' – it had been a very brief account of practical matters and contraceptive spells. The last thing on Slughorn's list had been the female side to all of this – he hadn't even touched upon the topic of menstruation. The only reason Regulus knew what it was and how it worked was due to the numerous conversations between Bellatrix and Cissy on the topic – thinking he was too little to understand what they were talking about. And sure, Isa also helped a bit, with her steadfastness to break taboos and talk about these kinds of things, but she was often censured by the boys around.

But no – the idea of pleasure experience for the girl was something that Slughorn had not even slightly hinted at, and that was exactly what Regulus needed to know more about.

He tried his friends; he sneakily threw out a sentence or two in the hope that they'd steer the conversation into the direction of their experience or their encounters with girls. Sadly, though, this only resulted in shameless bragging from Avery, Mulciber and Barty about how mind blowing they supposedly were in bed and shameless, crude descriptions about the girls they'd been with.

No, Regulus very quickly realised that his friends would be utterly useless when it came to understanding – or pleasuring – women.

Fuck.

He contemplated going through the library – but the kinds of books he needed would definitely be in the Restricted Section, and he'd need permission from a teacher to go acquire them. The thought of going to a teacher and asking to get his hands on a book about sex made him want to die at the very spot.

Surprisingly, help did come – and it arrived, oddly enough, indeed in the form of a book.

One evening in their dorm, Regulus made an ridiculous, sarcastic joke

to Barty about needing to clean his side of the room if he ever hoped to court Eira there — a joke he'd never have made normally but only served to nudge the conversation into a direction he desperately needed it to go. Luckily, the bait worked, and his dorm mates immediately launched into an elaborate discussion of Barty showering with Celine – making Regulus's skin crawl – and some position that'd apparently 'driven her crazy'. It was all rather nauseating information that Regulus could do without, but it came with the prize of him mentioning a book that Evan's parents had gifted their son.

Some kind of manual.

The holy grail.

Of course, *of course*, Evan's parents would have given him a book like that. The Rosiers were the most loving and openly affectionate couple Regulus had ever seen – very much to Evan's dismay and embarrassment, but in essence actually rather endearing. It only made sense that they'd want to pass on their romantic wisdom to their son.

Regulus didn't sleep much that night. He couldn't simply ask Evan to borrow the book – it was too uncharacteristic; he always zoned out when they discussed these things, so if he were to bluntly ask for it, they'd immediately know he was up to something.

Instead, he pretended to sleep in the next morning, and the second his dorm mates left the room, Regulus sprang into action.

He sprinted to Evan's trunk, his heart pounding, and began rifling through it. He rummaged through clothes, books and other useless stuff, praying that Evan had brought the book with him to school, and then, finally – his fingers brushed against something promising.

A hardcover. He pulled it out, turning it over in his hands.

Of Practice and Pleasure: A Guide to the Art of Physical Intimacy.

Yes.

Yes.

*****

Friday came soon. Both Regulus and Isa had pretended the entire week that they weren't, in fact, going to see each other naked at the end of the week – although, Regulus had noticed, when Friday

afternoon arrived, Isa's voice had climbed a bit too high and her words spilled out quicker than usual.

Regulus had managed to push away the thoughts about him and Isa far from his mind and had been pretty adept at ignoring the nerves knotting in his stomach, but by dinner time, the nerves had become unbearable and he'd barely managed to touch his food.

"*Finally*, a party," Evan sighed in content, "can you believe that our last party was the Quidditch victory party? Can't believe we've done without for so long."

"Yeah, it's gonna be brilliant," Barty said with a smirk. "Even Snape's coming tonight."

Regulus noticed that Isa had pointedly ignored Regulus's gaze all throughout dinner, which was probably for the best.

"What time are you going?" Isa asked, her tone a tad too casual.

"Seven," Evan replied.

Regulus flicked his gaze toward her, catching the briefest glance in return. Seven. The dorm would be empty at seven.

"You sure you're not coming, Black?" Barty asked, looking suspicious.

Regulus shrugged. "No. Too much to do. I can barely keep up with O.W.L.s."

Barty narrowed his eyes but didn't press, probably assuming it was Revolution-related again.

"And you, Nott?" Evan turned to Isa. "Amaryllis and Melania are coming."

"No, thanks," Isa said flatly. "Too much homework, and I don't care for Slughorn's stupid parties anyway."

Regulus and Isa didn't look at each other again, focusing on the food on their plates instead.

Regulus swallowed.

Were they actually going to do this?

*****

“Good luck with your homework, Black!” Barty called with a smirk as the dormitory door slammed shut behind him.

Regulus stood frozen for a moment, listening to the fading footsteps. The dorm, usually rather loud and chaotic on Friday nights, now lay under a taut and tense quiet.

He had no clue what to do with himself. He paced back and forth, he fidgeted with the objects on everyone’s nightstands, he brushed his teeth twice and remade his bed three times, tugging the corner tighter with each attempt.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

He would’ve done this properly, given the chance – he’d done everything; candles, drinks, something warm and inviting, perhaps even rose petals. Frankly, the thought of covering his bed in rose petals made him shudder, but he knew Isa was the kind of girl that liked it, so he probably would have anyway.

Oh, *fuck*, should he’ve done something like that?

He sighed deeply and cast a few floating orbs, bathing the dorm in a warm golden glow instead of the room’s harsh lighting. It would have to do.

Regulus smoothed the blanket on his bed one last time when the sound of the door creaking open made him whirl around.

Isa stepped inside, slowly and silently. A warm cloak was draped loosely around her shoulders. Neither of them spoke as she began moving toward him, her footsteps soft on the floor.

Regulus tried to control his pulse, but his heart thundered in his chest. He bit his lip nervously, his mind racing through everything he’d read and planned, while Isa’s steps brought her closer and closer. When she stood before him, she slid the cloak off her shoulders, revealing a thin, delicate night robe underneath.

Their gazes met — an exchange of deep, raw emotions reflected in their eyes. They were going to do this.

Then, without breaking eye contact, she slowly removed her night robe, rustling it between her fingers before letting it fall to the floor with surprising elegance, leaving her standing before him bathed in the dim glow of the floating lights. Her brown eyes looked

determined, yet Regulus didn't miss the flicker of nervous energy in them.

Regulus swallowed, his gaze intentionally traveling over her — first over her golden hair, now cascading freely down her back and shoulders instead of in one of her characteristic braids, her beautiful, slightly flushed face, and ultimately, her stunning figure. The red silk lingerie hugged every curve of her body impossibly well.

His breath caught as he stared at her, his throat turning impossibly dry.

"You look beautiful," he whispered earnestly, running his eyes carefully over her again. He felt a rush of heat spread over his face that he couldn't suppress.

Oh, he *hated* that he was like this. Hated that he couldn't just confidently woo her, or simply lift her and carry her to his bed to have his way with her.

To be honest, though, her looks would sweep even the most experienced bloke off their feet.

"You seem surprised," Isa said softly, a teasing lilt in her tone. She didn't break their gaze. "You didn't think I would dress for the occasion? The day that, after all this time, we're going to prove the rumours right?"

She smirked, but Regulus knew her long and well enough to notice the nerves through the facade of humor. He saw her vulnerability there, in the faint tremble of her hands, the flicker of nerves in her eyes, the flexing fingers at her sides. He could see the courage it took for her to stand in front of him like this.

She stepped forward, taking a hand in hers. The closeness was dizzying; her perfume was intoxicating – delicate and familiar. He could feel her breath ghosting over his collarbone, could hear the soft catch in her throat as she exhaled. His heart hammered against his ribs, and he was afraid that she might hear it too.

He didn't know where to look – her face, her body, or her hands in his. It was only when she took his other hand and forced him to look at her, that he saw all the different shades of brown in her eyes – mocha, umber, chocolate…

"Reg," she murmured, her voice barely audible. She guided one of his

hands to her waist. “Kiss me.”

So he did.

Until recently, he’d never wondered what kissing her might feel like. But over the past week, the question had consumed him — imagining the press of her lips against his, the sensation of her tongue, the softness of her hair in his fingers.

Now, as their lips met, he was surprised by how tender she felt, how deeply she kissed him. Her lips were soft, warm, and deliberate. The kiss started slow and exploratory — Regulus gently cupped her face, tilting his head to deepen the angle. His lips grazed hers, feeling the way in which she softly bit his lower lip, sending an involuntary shiver coursing through him.

Her hands slipped beneath his t-shirt, fingers grazing his bare sides and he was pleased to realise that the touch sent sparks through him, the heat spreading through his body, making his pulse quicken.

He could do this.

They could do this.

They slowly walked back to his bed, settling down as Isa sat in his lap. They took their time — kissing for a long while, Isa carefully grazing his sides, and Regulus gently tracing her hair and face with his hands. Isa tentatively stroked Regulus’s stomach, her fingers brushing against the contours of his muscles, before tugging at the hem of his shirt. He lifted his arms without hesitation, allowing her to pull it over his head and cast it aside.

A moment of stillness followed, their foreheads nearly touching as they caught their breath, their eyes locked. The flash of anticipation and shyness in Isa’s eyes made Regulus swallow.

She had to enjoy it. He had to make sure she’d enjoy it. He couldn’t live with the idea of doing this, taking this, and her not enjoying it.

After all she’d done for him – their entire lives, and especially the past few weeks, spending every minute with him, assuring him, helping him. After all that she was prepared to do for him, all that she was prepared to surrender, for him…

With Isa in his lap, his bare stomach against hers, her breath hot and warm against his skin, they were at a crossroads. They were more

exposed than they'd ever been, closer than they'd ever been, yet nothing compared to how exposed, how close they were about to become. Both of them stilled, letting the realisation settle for a split second before Regulus stroked a stray lock of golden hair out of her face and gently captured her mouth again. She kissed him back, slow and deep, and Regulus moved with her, nipping her underlip playfully.

He felt her smile against his lips in response, a gesture which sent a jolt of electricity through his body. Another playful bite drew a beautiful moan from her lips.

The fear, buried very deep down, that perhaps he wouldn't be able to, the idea that perhaps he couldn't do it because she was Isa, because she was a girl – it all evaporated right there.

Because there, with her hands tangling through his hair, his hands stroking her back, the initial reluctance, his focus on the practical things — what he'd have to do, what she's possibly like — shifted to a curiosity, an *eagerness* to explore her, to feel her and to find out how he'd get another one of those incredibly arousing moans over her lips.

It didn't take long for him to find out; he slowly trailed a path of kisses from her lips to her neck, to her elegant shoulders, feeling her heart beating frantically against him. Her breath was short and ragged and hitched as he slowly opened her bra behind her back. With a slow, deliberate movement, he lowered the straps. He felt her shiver against him as he pulled it off, revealing her breasts for him.

Damn.

"Wow," he breathed, looking up. Her gaze was shy, self conscious. The knowledge that she let him in on this private part of her, so different from the fierce, strong Isa she showed to the outside world, made him grow irrationally hard under her.

That, and the way in which she moaned as he caressed the soft skin of her breasts, followed by the hardness of her nipples.

Yes, he could do this, *wanted* this, *longed* for it. Wanted to feel her everywhere, taste all of her.

All his initial insecurities and reservations vanished as he slowly guided her on her back. Her hair lay sprawled over the mattress, a beautiful mess of gold against the white cover, her eyes wide with lust and anticipation.

He was so engrossed by the sight of Isa under him that he even managed to ignore the slight embarrassment of how little he needed to grow so obviously aroused. Subconsciously, he angled himself strategically so as not to press too hard against her, but Isa boldly pulled him straighter, pulled him closer to her, eyes locked. He shortly closed his eyes as he towered over her, kissing her neck softly. He felt how her breath hitched, how her body arched into his as he pressed against her.

Softly, slowly, did he kiss his way down, from her neck to her collarbones, to her breasts, to her lower stomach. His throat turned dry, his heart was hammering in his chest as he arrived at her waistband. The heat that radiated from her skin, her flushed cheeks as he looked up, the eyes full of wonder — oh, he was going to explode.

As he hooked his fingers under the waistband he looked up again.

“Can — can I —” he stammered, his voice hoarse and thick.

She nodded.

His hands trembled as he slowly pulled the fabric down, revealing her to him in all her nakedness and beauty.

He swallowed.

All the research, all the lengths he’d gone through to prepare for this moment – what to do, what it would feel like – and none of it compared. Nothing could have prepared him for the sheer awe of seeing her like this – and funnily enough, he realised he didn’t need a book at all to tell him what to do. No, he realised that they, together, could work it out perfectly themselves.

His breath ghosted over the most sensitive part of her skin, drawing a soft, unguarded moan from her lips. The sound sent a rush of heat through him. He hesitated for a moment, heart pounding, as he debated his next move.

He wanted to taste her.

He wanted to taste her, feel her on his tongue.

But he knew it was a very intimate thing — more than all other things they could do. He knew it instinctively, but also from the way his friends laughed about it, shrugged it off as something to receive but not to give.

He didn't understand it, though — with her lying under him, in front of him, completely exposed, he wanted nothing more, nothing but.

Yet, he also realised that it was insanely private, something that perhaps only lovers did. And they weren't lovers, they were forced to do this, weren't they?

So, instead, he slipped back up, lying next to her, low enough to look at her, to kiss her, as his fingers slowly trailed to her centre.

The sight was beautiful, breathtaking, making him achingly aroused — how her entire body reacted to the first touch, slow and tentative, how she arched into his fingers, moaned against his hair.

Fuck.

Then, he slowly retreated his hand and took off the remainder of his clothes. Even now, in the heat of the moment, the room barely lit, he had a hard time swallowing away the lump in his throat as he stood completely naked in front of her. She shot him a small, encouraging smile as he towered over her, positioning himself, aligning his body with hers.

The room was completely silent barring the sound of their quickened, nervous breaths.

He took a deep breath and looked up at her.

"Are you — can I?" he asked, his voice hoarse and barely audible.

Oh, they were actually going to do this. There was no way to describe the anticipation and nerves coursing through Regulus's body.

He was actually going to sleep with her. With Isa.

He'd never thought about it. Never considered it. And when the topic arose, he was mostly afraid – both afraid that he wouldn't compare, and afraid that he perhaps wouldn't be able to do it.

And now, he had discovered that he could, that he would, and that he *wanted*.

"Yes, Reg," she whispered.

With one hand steadying him over her and the other directing him, he slowly, gently entered her.

And when he did — *oh* , it was bliss.

He briefly closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath through his teeth, trying to compose himself while he put his forehead against hers.

Now he understood – now he understood the stupid bragging from his friends about how long they could last, understood the somewhat embarrassing comments about it in Evan's book – because only the feeling entering her, and the way she tightened around him, could pull him over the edge.

He was never going to last.

It was impossible to stretch this, impossible to postpone.

"You okay?" he whispered once he'd opened his eyes, one hand still keeping his body in place above hers, the other now stroking some locks out of her face.

She nodded, her eyes big and anticipating.

He kept his head against hers as he slowly started to move, every motion sending a jolt of fire, of complete pleasure through his body.

He kissed her sloppily and groaned at the sensation of her lips against his as he moved in her.

Still, despite the overwhelming feeling of all of it, despite the fact that the entire world seemed to stop existing, despite his focus on composing himself, he felt it. The tensed chest, the clutched hips.

He opened his eyes and locked them with Isa's.

"Ies," he whispered, his voice hoarse. He swallowed. "Am I — am I hurting you?"

Isa shook her head quickly. "No — no it's normal, it's—"

He flinched.

No. He had one condition only. They weren't going to do it this way.

He slowly retreated, the panic washing over her as a result.

"Shh," he shushed her, seeing her confused and panicked eyes, and her mouth to open in opposition. "We can't do it like this, Ies," he whispered, kissing her earlobe softly, "you're supposed to enjoy it

too."

He gently guided her on her side, closing behind her. He stroked her hair aside so he had full access to her neck and ears, and then let his fingers trail downwards, softly, from her neck, along her side, then slowly between her thighs. She shuddered at his touch, making him stifle a groan against the skin of her neck.

He carefully opened her thighs and entered her, but didn't move. Instead he searched for her hand and stretched his fingers over hers as he directed them to her warm centre.

"Now," he whispered, "show me what you like."

And she did — he moved slowly inside of her while she navigated him outside, showing him how to please her. And with his lips to her ears, he learned that she wanted to be loved, caressed, cherished — both with his movements and with his words. With his breath hot against her ears, his hands in hers, he whispered how beautiful she was, how good she felt, how hard she made him and she moaned, *oh* how she moaned uncontrollably, letting go of everything, surrendering all — she *was* beautiful, she *felt* indescribably good and *oh* how hard she made him…

He groaned, sweating and his mouth dry, knowing he was close — but he couldn't finish now, he mustn't… but how not to, with every movement relieving the ache but also adding to it… he kissed her neck as he tried to control himself but once she glanced sideways, her brown eyes warm and loving and full of desire, then rolling upwards, and she moaned his name — "*Oh, Reg*" — with a high voice, taking over by pleasure and then he felt it — the waves of pleasure washing over her, clutching him inside of her with every wave… and it was too much, he was without control, and he breathed against her neck, above her ears and he let go, feeling the completely, uncontrollable ecstasy master him and leaving him, inside her.

They remained like that for some time – intertwined in all possible ways, with him inside her, his arms tightly around her – while they caught their breaths, Regulus pressing some short kisses onto her neck while steadying his breath.

His fingers began to trail along her side absentmindedly, tracing lazy patterns on her warm skin. Isa squirmed slightly, a soft giggle escaping her lips as the touch tickled her.

He let his hand rest for a minute after which she turned her head just

enough to catch his gaze, to lock their eyes.

For a moment, the absurdity of the situation seemed to hit them both, and they both burst into laughter. Their laughter was loud and unrestrained, roaring and shaking – a release of the tension, the absurdity of the situation where they'd found themselves in, a light contrast with the dark world that forced them into so many impossible angles.

Isa shook her head, still laughing, her cheeks glowing with warmth. "Oh, Reg, we did it," she said, a touch of disbelief in her voice.

Regulus pressed a kiss to her neck, his lips brushing against the damp skin.

"I know," he murmured, not quite believing what had just happened.

She shifted slightly, turning to face him fully now. He moved with her, taking a moment to pull the blanket over their bodies almost reverently to make sure she was completely covered by the blanket's warmth. Isa nestled into his embrace, curling up against him like this was the most natural, and not the most bizarre, thing in the world.

Her smirk returned, playful and teasing.

"Who would've thought you were such a gentleman, Black?"

Regulus huffed a quiet laugh, rolling his eyes. "I was raised well, Nott," he replied, unable to hide the touch of shyness in his voice.

Isa's smirk deepened as she tilted her head, her voice dripping with humour. "Clearly."

They didn't exchange any more words – instead, Regulus was completely absorbed by the feeling of Isa tracing small circles on his chest, letting their breath sync as they drifted off to sleep.

At some point, Regulus vaguely registered the soft rustling of movement next to him. He blinked his eyes open to the still blurry sight of Isa putting on her clothes. He watched her silently for a moment before she caught his gaze.

She offered a small, warm smile and leaned down to whisper, "I'd better get back to the dorm before… everyone here wakes up."

Regulus nodded, his eyelids already heavy again. "Alright," he

murmured, his voice thick with sleep as he started to drift off again.

Isa took a quiet step toward the draped curtains, but just as she was about to slip away, Regulus reached out lazily, his fingers brushing against hers before closing gently around her hand.

The touch made her pause. She turned back, her expression softening as she looked down at him. He gave her hand a sleepy squeeze, his grip light but deliberate, his lips curving into the faintest of smiles, his head more asleep than awake.

Isa's own smile deepened as she cupped his hand with both of hers, her fingers warm and reassuring. Slowly, she lowered his hand back onto the mattress, tucking it carefully beneath the blanket.

"Go back to sleep, Reg," she whispered, her tone tender.

*****

The next morning, Regulus awoke to an empty dormitory, a rare occurrence that left him momentarily disoriented. He sat up, blinking groggily, and with the faint trace of Isa's perfume lingering in the sheets around him, memories of the previous evening came rushing back.

Relief, disbelief, and something he couldn't really place washed over him all at once.

He quickly shook the feeling off and instead pushed himself off the bed to make his way to the showers. The memories rushed in even clearer as he stood under the hot water. He quickly turned the dial to cold, letting the shock of icy water ground him as he tried to make sense of it all.

He felt relief – relief that he was probably closer to being able to defy Bellatrix's nasty probing techniques. That had, after all, been the sole goal of what had unfolded the previous night. Yes, they'd still have to work relentlessly for the rest of the week, but he knew, he felt that they were close. That perhaps, *perhaps* , it might even work. That perhaps, there was light at the end of this dark, sickening, twisted tunnel.

He felt relief that it had been good. Not good; mind-blowing. Never had he expected it to feel that way. Deep down, he'd been afraid he hadn't even been able to do it; to sleep with a girl. He'd been afraid, too, that perhaps he wouldn't be able to do it with her specifically –

because she knew him too well, had seen too much. But he had been able to do it. It had all come natural to him, and it had been *good*.

With this, though, also came confusion and an annoying nagging feeling. Because what did that mean – what did it mean that it'd felt good?

He tried desperately not to think about Potter, not compare it to his experiences with him, putting his experiences with Isa and Potter next to each other felt like defiling them both. But, without comparing them, what did it mean – what did it mean that he had at least enjoyed both? He loved him, not her, but he had enjoyed her – thoroughly, truly.

Was it that he, perhaps, like his friends, could enjoy it for the sake of pleasure, without loving the person underneath him? Was this what they meant with meaningless, blunt and plain sex?

But it hadn't been meaningless, right? It hadn't been blunt, hadn't been plain. And he *did* love her, but just not like that.

He groaned.

It was too bloody early for this. Too bloody early. Besides, he had more important things to focus on.

One crisis at a time.

*****

It turned out, though, that it wasn't even early; on the contrary, by the time he was dressed and heading to breakfast, the meal was already nearing its end, and the Great Hall was buzzing with weekend chatter.

It felt strange, almost bizarre, to be the one joining his friends at the table instead of the other way around; especially the last few weeks, he'd risen early every morning and had often finished breakfast before his friends even woke up.

It was then a very strange experience to be greeted by the sight of his friends at the Slytherin table on a Saturday morning – after a *party* even – one they'd clearly enjoyed, measured by the slightly hungover faces. Once they spotted Regulus sauntering over, though, their expressions turned strangely smug – as if they felt proud for outspeeding him for once at breakfast.

Rolling his eyes at the thought, Regulus settled down at the table across from Barty and Evan, with Severus and Mulciber flanking one side of him and Avery the other.

Their initial smugness had, in the meanwhile, turned into something way too happy considering their nightly escapade, and a bit too pleased for Regulus's liking.

Regulus arched an eyebrow at their expressions but let it slide, instead focusing on which eggs to choose for breakfast. It remained inconspicuously quiet while he piled his plate. Evan and Barty exchanged a glance and Avery, Severus and Mulciber were way too immersed by the way he poured his pumpkin juice.

It made Regulus eerily anxious.

"Good morning?" He ventured cautiously, glancing at his friends who were still watching him, but now with barely contained hilarity.

"Oh yes," Mulciber replied, smirking. "The morning is *very* good."

"I agree. I like mornings," Avery said, nodding sagely. His exaggerated tone made Regulus narrow his eyes.

What was going on here? His friends were hardly known for 'liking mornings' in general, let alone Saturday morning after a *party* .

Then Barty leaned forward, his grin widening like he'd just won a prize. "Though I'd say nights are better," he said, his voice dripping with innuendo. "Don't you agree, mates?"

"What?" Regulus asked. He stilled, his fork hovering mid-air. His friends' overly smug expressions, the way they were all clearly holding back their laughter – *what* was going on here?

"Oh, especially your night, Black," Mulciber added, his tone gleefully teasing. He shared a conspiratorial look with the others.

Regulus felt his stomach drop.

"W – what?" he repeated, his voice cracking slightly as his friends' smirks grew wider.

Barty, unable to contain himself any longer, burst into laughter.

"We'd forgotten our special bottle of Firewhiskey in the dorm — you know, for Slughorn's party and after," Evan began, grinning from ear

to ear, clearly relishing every word.

Oh no.

Regulus's heart sank. He knew where this was going even before Evan continued.

"So," Evan drawled, dragging it out, "we returned to retrieve it... at a very *special* moment."

Avery nodded theatrically. "Indeed. Their timing apparently couldn't have been better."

No.

Barty leaned back in his seat, his grin positively wicked. "Just as we reached the door, we heard some interesting noises. You know, the kind that indicate someone's having their... moment suprême."

No.

Regulus stared at them in horror, his fork frozen in midair.

"'*Oh, Reg,*'" Barty mimicked in a high-pitched voice, sending the group into fits of laughter.

"You, Black," Evan said, trying and failing to keep a straight face. "You've got some tricks up your sleeve."

"Yes," Barty drawled, his tone dripping with mock admiration. "It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?"

Regulus's face turned scarlet as the realisation hit him — they hadn't just pieced it together; they'd *heard*. The most private, intimate moment between Isa and him – and they'd *heard*.

No, no.

He could have died on the spot, but his friends clearly saw only humour in it.

"So — please share with the class, Black," Mulciber smirked. "Who was the lucky girl?"

Then — another example of *impeccable* timing — Isa entered the Great Hall and strode toward the Slytherin table with her usual poise, sitting across from Melania and Amaryllis without so much as a glance in

Regulus's direction.

Regulus couldn't help it. His eyes trailed over her, lingering on her face, her hair, her body… Her ears, so sensitive when you breathed against them, how she had trembled at his whispered words… And her stomach, how it had curved under the touch of his lips trailing down and down… and her legs, the kissing of her inner thighs and how it had drawn so many sounds from her, like a beautiful song…

Regulus yanked his focus back to his plate, shoving eggs onto his fork before Isa could meet his eyes and he'd be unable to compose himself. Besides, he didn't want to let on to his friends who it was they were discussing.

Unfortunately, when Regulus looked up to his friends, he soon came to realise it was too late for that.

Barty and Evan were staring at him, their eyes wide with shock. Then Barty's face split into a grin so wicked it seemed to split his face. They glanced between Regulus, Isa — who was now chatting casually with her friends — and the rest of the group at the table.

"*No way*," Evan breathed, his tone stunned.

Barty let out a bark of laughter. "That was *Nott*?" he asked incredulously. "*Nott* who was singing your praises?"

Mulciber and Avery erupted into laughter, cackling in delight.

Regulus groaned, leaning closer. "Don't tell her," he hissed urgently. "*Don't* tell her. She'd die if she knew you heard."

"Oh, no worries, mate," Barty said, his grin impossibly wide. "We'll be very discreet about it."

*****

True to their word, Regulus's friends didn't breathe a word about walking in on him and Isa in the dorm. Unfortunately, though, in the hilarity of the moment, Barty and Evan had already shared what they'd witnessed when they'd returned to Slughorn's afterparty – and although Regulus's friends knew to keep quiet when Regulus demanded it, Crabbe and Selwyn had no such loyalties. So, already on Monday, it seemed the entire House of Slytherin knew about Regulus getting a girl off in the dormitory. The only consolation was that no one knew it was Isa. And, Regulus was rather impressed, even Barty

had managed not to blurt out bluntly to Isa that he knew exactly who the girl was – something for which Regulus was very grateful.

In the final week before the holidays, Regulus and Isa threw themselves again into work in the Come and Go Room. Every moment was spent drilling Occlumency – Isa challenged his mind relentlessly, probing and breaking through his defenses while Regulus practiced steering his thoughts toward safe memories —missions, schoolwork, or other harmless fragments. And it was working – with enough focus, he could push his mind away from something involving Potter and toward Isa.

It did come with its own challenges, though – because Isa, while sifting through his thoughts, inevitably stumbled upon flashes of herself, of her body beneath him. The first time it'd happened had been horribly awkward, especially as they hadn't once discussed the evening itself. They hadn't touched upon it, hadn't assessed, hadn't once raised it.

It had happened and that was that. Life went on.

Still, the ability to redirect his thoughts to her was a relief. If Bellatrix or anyone else ever pried into his mind, it was far better for them to see Isa in his bed than James Potter.

And with Potter keeping his distance since the revelation that his secret lover was, in fact, a Revolutionary, there was no need to torment Regulus's mind, or heart, for that matter, with his presence.

That was, until Potter cornered him after their final Quidditch practice before the holidays.

As the team packed up, Potter lingered behind.

"I'll catch up, Padfoot," he called, waving off his best friend. Sirius raised a brow but didn't push, likely assuming Potter wanted to discuss strategies with Regulus — they had used that pretense often, after all.

Regulus, catching on, flinched. He had no desire to be alone with Potter. Keeping his head down, he hastily shoved his feet into his shoes, fumbling with the laces.

"Is it true?" Potter asked, his voice breaking the awkward silence.

Regulus froze. He slowly lifted his gaze. "What?"

Potter stepped closer, his tone sharper. “The rumours. Are they true? Did you have a girl up in your dorm?”

Regulus’s expression flattened. “Rumours have already made it to the Gryffindors?” he asked dryly. “Fascinating.”

“Oh, yes,” Potter said, crossing his arms. “They’re quite juicy, too. The wildest one claims you were overheard having sex.”

Regulus’s hands stilled on his laces, but he didn’t answer, his expression unreadable.

Potter’s impatience flared. “So? Are they true?”

Regulus hesitated, unsure of how to respond. His silence, however, said enough.

Potter scoffed, his tone laced with disbelief. “Who was it?”

Regulus’s mind raced. He could dismiss the question, tell Potter it was none of his business — or make up a name. *Yes* , that was a solid plan. Anything but mentioning Isa. If Potter knew the truth, after all his suspicions...

But Potter’s expression shifted, showing that realisation was already dawning. His shock morphed into something wounded. “It was Nott, wasn’t it?”

Regulus sighed and remained silent.

Potter let out a bitter laugh, his hurt now masked by anger. “‘Just friends’, ‘not even able to *think* of her that way’,” Potter mimicked venomously. “Very fucking credible, Black. Guess that wasn’t real either, was it?”

Without waiting for a response, Potter turned on his heel and stalked out of the locker room, leaving Regulus alone, still crouched over his shoes.

For a long moment, Regulus didn’t move, his gaze fixed on the laces he hadn’t yet tied. He waited for the ache in his chest to fade, but instead, it only grew, spreading over him.

Potter’s face lingered in his mind – the plain, raw hurt in his expression, the anger. Very deep down, pushed very far, far away, he wanted to chase after him, spill everything. Tell him that it hadn’t

been a choice, that he'd been forced to do it, that life had pushed him that way. That otherwise, he probably wouldn't have been with anyone other than him, always and ever.

But then the image of Potter surfaced – the disgust, the appalled disbelief when he found out Regulus was a Revolutionary.

Who cared, anyway?

The chapter with Potter was over. Done. The book closed.

And it was for the best.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Regulus being a teenager...

Alright so I did not plan on publishing the entire dorm scene. I wrote it for myself to get a clear picture of the processes that Reg goes through, and then I wrote a version where I left it out and felt like I didn't do his character development justice and so on I went; then I thought well what the hell, I'll just go with it and publish the entire thing.

It does make me realise that I owe the story something similar with James, so yes...

Also I did want to add that this is (still, truly) a jegulus fic and that everything happening has a crucial role in the plot.

Always curious about what you guys think!

Chapter 21: Of Dread & Dances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The train ride back to King's Cross was bizarre. Regulus sat in their usual compartment, the banter and laughter between his friends sliding past him as he tried to distract himself with a book from the Muggle philosopher Montesquieu. He went over the same sentences ten, twenty times without taking them in, instead glancing up and letting his thoughts wander as his gaze swept over his friends – the way Evan playfully nudged Barty, the way Mulciber unexpectedly disarmed Avery.

If it really went wrong, if his defences faltered, if they found out… This might be the last time he'd see his friends. The last time to sit with them.

Because he knew, he knew that if Mother knew, that if Bellatrix knew, he wouldn't live to see another day.

Cissy would be merciful – sure, she'd hate him, but he wouldn't want him killed. Though, if Regulus were completely honest, he'd prefer to be, if they indeed found out. Just the thought of his family members finding out, or the other distinguished Revolutionaries that'd be in the room – the level of shame, the self-loathing he felt only thinking about it…

No, it'd be better to die.

Regulus was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of the compartment door sliding open, revealing Isa in the doorframe.

Ever since that night, his friends had made it their mission to behave as suggestively and awkwardly as possible whenever Isa was around. Regulus truly hoped his friends would get over themselves quickly – even though no one had shared that they all, in fact, knew that it had been Isa up the dorm, Regulus was afraid that their annoying demeanour would quickly give it away.

Now too, Mulciber and Avery exchanged knowing glances, their smirks poorly concealed, while Barty leaned back in his seat with a grin that practically screamed mischief.

“Nott,” he drawled, his tone dripping with mockery.

Isa raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Crouch,” she replied, her features a mix of poise and faint confusion at Barty’s insinuations.

Regulus, however, shot Barty a sharp glare, warning him silently to stop. Barty, predictably, only smirked wider, raising his hands in mock surrender.

Isa, in the meantime, seemed surprisingly collected – although, Regulus came to think of it, Barty and Isa always found themselves in some kind of stand-off, both of them trying to outshine the other.

Before this situation could get any worse, Regulus rose from his seat, doing his best to ignore the suggestive glances exchanged between Mulciber and Avery.

“You’re welcome to join us, Nott,” Evan offered kindly.

Isa gave him a polite smile, her gaze briefly flicking over all the blokes in the compartment before settling on Regulus.

“Thanks, Evan, but I need to speak to Regulus about something.”

Barty snorted incredulously. “*Speak*, yeah, right.”

Isa froze in her tracks, slowly turning towards him. “What is *that* supposed to mean, Crouch?” she asked, her voice icy yet composed.

“Barty,” Regulus said, his tone sharp and low.

But Barty ignored him, his grin widening mischievously.

“‘*Oh, Reg,*’” he mimicked, moaning, tone high-pitched and dragging out the name.

The effect was immediate.

Avery and Mulciber burst out into loud laughter, Evan following, albeit a bit reluctantly. At the same time, Isa’s eyes narrowed slightly, the faintest blush creeping up her face before she managed to compose herself.

She looked at Barty with a cool and unbothered face, though Regulus knew her well enough to know she was seething beneath the surface.

“Ah, Crouch,” Isa said, her voice carrying an air of mockery so precise

it rivaled Barty's. "Why don't you take some lessons from Regulus here? You might actually learn a thing or two for the next time you're wooing a girl. Though…" Her mouth curved into a sly smile, her tone razor-sharp, "You'd have to last more than a minute first."

A tense silence filled the compartment for a split second before the boys burst into laughter, clapping each other's backs in hilarity.

Barty's smirk flattered, his expression hardening as he glared at Isa. Regulus had the inkling that she'd aimed at something personal with Amaryllis, making it a rather low blow.

"Isa," Regulus warned, rubbing a hand across his temple. "Let's go."

Isa shot Barty one last icy glance before turning on her heel, heading back into the corridor. Regulus followed close behind, the laughter echoing behind them.

The train was crammed, and they had to walk through several cars before they found an empty compartment.

"That was low, Nott," Regulus said, closing the door behind them and giving her a pointed look.

Isa rolled her eyes, crossing her arms. "So, he's allowed to embarrass me like that in front of five blokes, and I just have to… bite my tongue?"

Regulus sighed, letting the remark slide.

They stood in silence for a moment.

"So," Regulus quipped dryly, trying to lighten the mood. "This is our final goodbye?"

Isa gave him a small smile. "No, it's going to go fine. We've worked night and day on this, and I haven't been able to find anything… scandalous all week."

Regulus opened his mouth to retort that the flashes of memory of Isa in his bed would definitely qualify as scandalous—

"Oh, shut it, Black," Isa bit, clearly sensing his thoughts.

Regulus laughed.

"So, when is the meeting?" Isa continued.

“Tomorrow evening,” Regulus sighed, suddenly feeling a flush of nerves washing through him.

Cissy had notified him by owl that the meeting was to take place on Saturday evening. She had also disclosed who would be present — the Dark Lord, obviously, Bellatrix, Lucius, Thorne, Yaxley and herself.

It was very uncharacteristic of her to disclose this kind of information via owl, and very uncharacteristic to attend a meeting – and the fact that she did, spoke volumes of how much she cared about Regulus. The feeling took his appreciation for her to a complete new level.

“It’s going to work, Reg. You’ll be fine,” Isa repeated.

It didn’t go past him that she seemed foremost to reassure herself.

He pulled her into a hug, her smaller frame fitting perfectly against his. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he let out a deep sigh.

“Thank you, Ies,” he murmured. “For everything.”

Isa mumbled something against his chest, her voice muffled, and as they stood there for a long moment, their arms wrapped tightly around each other, eyes closed, it very much did feel like a goodbye.

*****

Of all the times Regulus had walked through the dimly lit hall leading to the Meeting Room in Bellatrix’s house, this time was positively the worst.

He had barely slept at night – a cruel irony, because sleep deprivation highly affected mental barriers. He’d been stuck in a vicious cycle of not being able to sleep, fretting over the effects it might have on his mental barriers, therefore stressing too much to be able to sleep, and on it went. It had been dawn already when he’d managed to fall asleep for a couple of hours.

Regulus was no stranger to dread. He’d had his fair share of it in his life.

For years, *so* many years, all the years spent with his governor, dread had been his constant companion, gnawing at the edges of his soul, ruthless and mordant.

And after – when the truth had come to light – it had returned tenfold,

with all his darkest secrets laid out for too many people to see. And after that, after they'd made him pay, dread had been all he felt.

Yes, dread might have easily been his middle name.

And yet, none of it — not the years of abuse he'd endured, not the traumatic events of it being dragged into the open, nor even the nightmares that haunted him since that photograph — none of it compared to this.

This time, dread wasn't just there in his mind or his gut – now, it was a noose, hanging around his neck, tightening with every step he took towards that door.

Each creak of the floorboards beneath his feet echoed like a countdown, each shallow breath burning with the knowledge that, very soon, he might not be breathing at all.

If they found out, if they uncovered only a shred of what he had been up to, what had done…

He was not going to see the end of it.

Later, he would have a hard time remembering how he'd entered the Meeting Room. As usual, the oval wooden table dominated the room; the Dark Lord already seated at its head. Flanking him were Thorne and Bellatrix. Thorne gave Regulus a smirk, to which Regulus might or might not have responded, and Bellatrix looked positively predatory, her posture rigid and eager and her lips twisted into a vicious smirk. Regulus completely missed the small, reassuring smiles from Lucius and Cissy as they stood near the entrance.

"Ah, Regulus." The Dark Lord's voice was silken and unhurried, his expression calm. "Come in. Sit. We'll begin the meeting in half an hour, once the others arrive. But for now, as you know, we have the more pressing matter of filling in the missing pieces."

Regulus nodded head stiffly, forcing his legs to move even though his legs felt like they were made of lead. While walking to a chair, he spotted Bellatrix's gaze.

She looked ravenous — positively predatory, her excitement barely contained beneath the surface of her manic grin.

It was going to be her.

It truly was going to be Bellatrix to do it.

The psychopathic bitch.

Yes, he'd anticipated this. He would've been surprised if she hadn't been the one. And still, still he had hoped, hoped so deeply, had begged to all the Gods – Muggle and Magical alike – to spare him from this. To spare him from being subjected to her sick ways once again.

Everything around him became a blur, his surroundings fading into a haze of muted shapes and colours. His heart slammed against his ribs, the pounding so loud it drowned out all else. His palms were slick with sweat, clenched into trembling fists in his lap.

Bellatrix noticed. Of course, she noticed. Her smirk widened, her dark eyes glittering with manic delight. "Well, well, *Reggie*," she drawled, her voice dripping with mockery. "What a *delicious* present. You and I, together again. What *fun* we had the last time, hmm?"

"Bella," Cissy interjected sharply, her voice warning, but it did nothing to diminish her sister's glee.

Regulus said nothing, keeping his face a mask of cold detachment, although, inside, his heart still thundered in his chest.

This was it. Do or die. Defend or surrender.

Hold the barriers. Defend the walls. Stand ground.

Bellatrix leaned forward, her bush of wild curls framing her face like a lion's mane. With a flick of her wrist, her wand soared effortlessly into her hand, a nauseating display of non-verbal, wandless magic that sent a chill down Regulus's spine.

"Now, my dear little cousin," she purred, "this is going to be *exquisite*. I'll take a little stroll through that clever mind of yours, and we'll see if you've missed anything. Perhaps you'll even enjoy it this time."

Regulus flinched at her words despite himself, but he kept his features cold, unyielding. Inside, he felt all of his feelings trying to gain the upper hand – fear, anger, panic, all warring for dominance.

He could feel her excitement radiating like a pulse — hungry, anticipatory, almost…aroused.

The Dark Lord spoke again, a note of amusement laced through his

voice. “Bellatrix, you may proceed. The Pensieve is ready – let us ensure no crucial details have been overlooked.”

Her smirk widened, and she raised her wand, pointing it directly at Regulus. “Let’s see, Reggie , what treasures you’ve hidden away this time.”

Instantly, without warning, she sliced through and entered his mind.

It hit like a wave.

The sensation was suffocating, as though his thoughts had been submerged in thick, choking fog. Her presence was invasive, clawing and prying at the walls of his mind – he could feel her probing, felt her curiosity, her eagerness. It was so different from Isa in his head; not particularly pleasant either but careful and tender in comparison.

Immediately, Regulus shot into focus. The mission – she wanted the information about the mission. Nothing less, nothing more.

He guided her deliberately to the memories – him in the Hogwarts library during the actual revelation, when he’d been utterly high by those ridiculous brownies, the research sessions in the Beauxbatons library, his meeting with Thorne before they both went to report to the Dark Lord. He controlled the flow, keeping her focus on these fragments only, although he already felt her probing, felt her pushing at the edges of the memories.

“Hmm,” her voice purred inside his head, silken and dangerous. “Is that all, dear cousin?”

She pushed deeper, her force like a storm tearing through his defenses. He barely managed to steer her to go over the same memories again instead of letting her go through his mind freely – he felt how she pressed harder. The storm intensified, howling through his mind, battering his walls. Her presence was overwhelming, her eagerness palpable. Regulus felt her delight as she pushed at the edges of his thoughts, hunting for cracks.

And then she stopped.

The Legot family crest.

Bellatrix’s presence sharpened, her excitement sharpening in his mind as she hovered over the memory.“Interesting,” she whispered, her voice a dagger in his skull. “When did you take such an interest in the

crest?”

Panic flared. He hadn’t anticipated this – hadn’t even thought of the book as a risk. But it was the book that Potter had shown him, Mathilde Legot’s children's book, that had spiked his interest in the crest, that had led to the big revelation.

Oh no, no. She could *not* see that memory.

He took a deep sigh, trying to keep his calm, to keep his demeanour, because he knew that she’d feel his nerves – and the nerves would raise suspicions.

Desperately, he pushed his mind to the Beauxbatons library again, but Bellatrix completely surprised him with the sheer force and power of her mind – she came at him with unrelenting force, her presence growing larger, heavier, suffocating. It was ruthless, merciless how she completely dominated his mind, how she completely suffocated his thoughts, her mind pressing against his with an intensity that left him reeling.

Never had he felt something like this. *So* forceful. It was equally as impressive as it was nauseating.

With a terrifying burst of power, she seized a memory — a hand passing him the book, large and familiar. Regulus’s heart stopped. She was so close — so close —

With everything he had, every shred of willpower, he fragmented the memory, forcing it to shift to Solène giving him the book in the Beauxbatons library. He shoved her focus there, straining with the effort, his mind trembling beneath the weight of her assault.

For a moment, she recoiled, surprised, but then she surged forward again, laughing — a wild, unhinged sound that reverberated through his skull.

“Nothing else, Reggie? Nothing naughty?”

Another surge.

Fuck.

Regulus fought to keep her out, but she was too strong, tearing through his mind with glee. He felt how she clung to a flicker of red that entered his thoughts – the colour of Gryffindor, of Potter – but

Regulus forced it away – shoving it into the deepest recesses of his mind – anywhere but here – he didn't think about where to push it to – as long as the memory was gone from him – gone from Potter, gone from Gryffindor, gone from that one sweater he often wore – and then, unbidden, unexpected to red lingerie – Isa – Regulus's heart sank – he tried to push her away, but as her interest spiked she latched onto it – like a predator sinking its teeth into prey – then a flash of him behind her, moving inside her, his breath at her ear, whispering something so private – *no* – Regulus collected all the power in his body, in his mind, in his soul, gathered everything he had, everything he was, and with a final blow, shoved her out of his mind.

The room spun as he came back to himself. Bellatrix was laughing, wild and triumphant.

"Oh, you *have* been naughty, Reg," she breathed. "*Isadora Nott.*"

Regulus felt his face heat up, especially when he heard the chuckle of Yaxley closeby.

"Bella, that's enough," Cissy shot sharply, coming to Regulus's defences.

Regulus summoned every ounce of cold detachment he could muster, burying his emotions beneath layers of indifference. He turned to Bellatrix, his gaze icy and detached, pushing the heat from his skin.

He forced his voice to remain calm, and it came out colder than he thought possible.

"I hardly think that has anything to do with the task. Do you?"

A tense silence stretched, Bellatrix's laughter fading into a twisted grin, her expression brimming with malice and amusement.

"No," the Dark Lord finally said, his tone calm but edged with subtle warning. His eyes studied Regulus with a calculating gaze that made Regulus's stomach tighten. "It does not."

The rest of the session passed in a blur. The Dark Lord sifted through Regulus's memories in the Pensieve, combing over them with precision, reviewing every detail several times, while everyone sat in anticipation, waiting for some missing piece of the puzzle.

And then came the conclusion.

Nothing new.

There was nothing hidden in Regulus's subconscious. Nothing that he'd forgotten to tell them. There was nothing they didn't already know.

Oh – all the things Regulus had done, had undergone because of this moment, and it hadn't even led to something.

The hours and hours, weeks and weeks of endless preparations – stripping himself completely bare for Isa as she dissected his mind piece by piece, his mind and thought laid completely bare for her, the evening in his dorm… All the time breaking apart his soul, restructuring it, compartmentalising it until his own thoughts felt foreign.

And all for bloody nothing.

Although relief flooded through him – overwhelming in all its intensity, so powerful and intense that it made him feel like that time he'd eaten the special brownies – the realisation still made him angry.

All of that effort. All of that pain. For nothing. They hadn't even found anything new.

Afterwards, the rest of the attendees trickled in – Dolohov, the Lestrange brothers, Mr. Carrow, Travers, Mr. Flint and Mr. Rosier all took a seat at the table. The meeting was mostly a summary and evaluation of all their efforts so far – listing Ministry workers sympathetic to the Revolution, those posing a threat, listing crucial importers and their allegiances, recent alumni from Hogwarts that might be interested, and – Regulus's part – students at Hogwarts that wouldn't mind rolling from their N.E.W.T.s straight into war.

Regulus had gone over his notes and names almost robotically – rattling off names, qualities and potential recruits as if on autopilot.

He was too overwhelmed, his mind wasn't in the room anymore – too overwhelmed by the fact that it had worked.

Six weeks. Six agonising weeks of preparation. Sleepless nights. Hours upon hours spent tearing his mind apart and piecing it back together with Isa's guidance. Every moment of fear, every drop of sweat and blood, all the lengths he had gone through with Isa — all of it had been to survive this moment.

And it had worked.

The last part of the meeting – something about a formal inauguration and a ritual of some kind – went completely past him, the words muted and meaningless. Then, when the meeting finally ended, Regulus didn't linger – the moment the Dark Lord dismissed them, he stood and made his way to the Entrance Hall, his movements quick. He didn't care how it looked – he was eager, *dying* to get away from her – just wanted to be away from Bellatrix as soon as possible, away from her as far as possible. From her predatory smirk, her glistening eyes and the twisted, nauseating way in which she twirled her wand between her fingers.

Without hesitation, he grabbed a handful of Floo powder and flooed to Black Manor.

When he stepped through the fireplace in the drawing room, Isa was already there. She looked pale and tense, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

She hadn't told him she was coming, but it made sense – she'd probably been dying of nerves, not knowing what to do with herself, and had decided to wait for him there – if he were to return.

She looked startled by Reg's sudden appearance, her brown eyes widening and worry etched into every line of her tired face.

She took a step forward. "Reg," she said, her voice soft, trembling slightly, the panic beneath it plain. "Did it—"

Before she could finish the sentence, though, the flames turned green once again, signalling the arrival of — Bellatrix.

Regulus's heart sank.

Why was she here? What did she want?

Hadn't she tormented him enough, already?

Bellatrix's predatory smirk hadn't faltered — if anything, it had only turned wider and more vicious at the sight of Isa standing next to Regulus. Her dark eyes glittered with malice as they flicked between them.

"Ah, look, cousin," she drawled, her voice smug and sweetly malicious. She held up a familiar roll of parchment. "You've forgotten

your notes."

Stupid – in all the hurry to get away from the room, to flee from his cousin, he'd forgotten his notes, only to, ironically, be subjected to her presence longer.

He held out his hand, mustering the little strength still left in his mind to compose his face as she extended the roll of parchment toward him. Regulus was careful not to touch her in the process, afraid that he might vomit from the feeling of her fingers alone.

"Thank you," he said, surprisingly icily, his voice detached, while, underneath the surface, pleading – *begging* for her to leave.

The mask of coldness only made Bellatrix's smirk grow – sharp and dangerous. "Well, thank you for tonight, cousin. I haven't had that much fun in ages."

Regulus's jaw tightened, but he didn't respond. The hate, the agony, the loathing he felt just by looking at her glistening eyes was so overwhelming it made his toes curl and his stomach churn.

He felt Isa's tension radiating behind him – he knew her well enough to recognise the careful, controlled breathing, as a prey hiding from its predator.

She still didn't know what had happened and he felt her mind race, trying to make sense of everything.

Bellatrix's eyes flicked back to him, her head tilting slightly as if inspecting a prized possession. "You have a strong mind, Regulus. You must have really worked on it." Her voice dropped, almost conspiratorial. "It does make one wonder, doesn't it? Whether you might have something to hide."

It felt as if she'd thrown a bucket of ice in his face. He barely managed the sharp inhale of breath. His heartbeat quickened and he did everything in his might to hold his composure, to not let his mask falter.

Bellatrix's smile turned sly. "Don't worry, though, Reggie. The truth always resurfaces. Believe me – I will see to that."

She released the notes, dropping them into his hand with a theatrical flourish before turning to Isa.

“Oh, dear Isa,” she purred, her voice mockingly sweet, “I just wanted to say — red truly looks ravishing on you.”

It took only a split second for Isa to realise what Bellatrix referred to – Regulus saw the realisation dawning in the slight blush on her cheeks. Isa managed to compose herself quickly – her expression was a masterwork of control; her gaze was calm, void of emotion, calculated. A very impressive feature, seeing who was standing in front of her.

“I know,” Isa said, her voice smooth and unflinching, the slightest of a sly smile tugging on the corners of her mouth. “That’s what Regulus thought too.”

Bold.

If Regulus hadn’t just gone through one of the worst nights in his life, he might have let out an incredulous laugh at Isa’s bravery.

Bellatrix, however, was unfazed as her grin twisted, vicious and delighted. “Oh, I am aware.”

With one final smirk, she stepped back into the fireplace, tossing the powder with a flick of her hand. “Isadora. Regulus.” Her voice lingered like poison as the flames roared green, then vanished, taking her with them.

The room was silent, both Regulus and Isa staring at the fireplace for a moment, as if checking whether she had actually, truly, in fact left.

Finally, Isa turned to him. Her voice was low and cautious, not much more than a hopeful whisper.

“It worked?” she breathed.

Regulus nodded, drawing a deep, shaky breath to brace himself for the emotions that he knew would flood him soon. “It worked.”

Their eyes met, and for a moment, they stood in silent disbelief as the enormity of it settled in.

“Oh, thank Merlin,” she breathed. “Oh, *thank Merlin*.”

Another silence stretched as they both let the realisation sink in of what they had achieved. All this work – day and night, for weeks, and all they’d had to give, all they’d had to surrender – and it had *worked*.

And then – then, complete and utter release followed.

Isa's disbelief melted into radiant, uncontainable joy so pure it lit the entire room, and Regulus followed, still completely overwhelmed.

"It worked!" Isa shouted, her laughter bright and unrestrained. "It worked, Reg!"

Regulus couldn't help himself. They launched into each other, their hug clashing and chaotic, arms wrapping tightly as laughter broke out uncontrollably, spilling into the air. And they shouted, they laughed, they cheered, and Regulus spun her in circles, and another one, and another, and they laughed, and they cheered some more.

"It worked! We did it!"

Around and around he spun her, both of them laughing so hard their sides ached, the room spinning with their euphoria as complete relief washed over them.

And then, just as suddenly, they froze.

The room fell quiet again as they stared at each other, breathless, their faces alight with triumph.

Both of them sighed.

"Why so relieved, though, Nott?" Regulus broke the silence, teasingly. Then, he mimicked her reassuring words – the words she'd repeated so many times he heard them in his dreams. "'It's going to work, Reg. You will be fine'. 'It's going to work.'"

Another silence followed, with Isa blinking sheepishly, unable to find a witty retort.

And then the absurdity of the situation hit them both – overwhelming and liberating. They burst into laughter again, unrestrained and uncontrolled, leaving them clutching at each other for support.

They'd dropped all pretense of decorum, neither of them caring how ridiculous or childish they looked as Regulus spun her in another series of triumphant circles, their cheers echoing through the room — full of relief, victory, and joy so pure it was dizzying.

When they finally broke apart, they were breathless, flushed, and unsteady on their feet, but they couldn't stop smiling.

“We have to celebrate,” Isa declared, her brown eyes sparkling with mischief.

Regulus quirked an eyebrow, leaning against the wall. “Celebrate how?”

Isa looked positively wicked as she marched to the liquor cabinet in the room, scanning its content like she was inspecting a prized collection. Her fingers trailed over several bottles before landing on a bottle of ridiculously expensive champagne. She plucked it from the shelf with a triumphant flourish.

“This,” she declared, holding it up like a trophy. “I know you’re not much of a drinker, but this…” She smirked, exhaling with exaggerated satisfaction. “This moment calls for something special.”

Regulus shrugged, reluctantly smiling as he rolled his eyes. “Alright – one glass won’t hurt.”

Isa drew her wand and pointed it at the bottle, the cork popping with a sharp, satisfying *pop.* She laughed as she poured the champagne into the glasses Regulus held out.

“To Regulus Black — survivor of psychopaths and impossible odds,” Isa toasted with a tease, raising her glass with a flourish.

Regulus, unable to suppress the laughter at her playful antics, clinked his glass against hers. “And to Isadora Nott – the most wonderful friend anyone could wish for.”

Isa shot him the warmest smile before taking a sip.

“You know, Reg,” she began, her tone suddenly thoughtful, “your uncle would be bloody proud of you.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow, urging her to explain.

Isa grinned wickedly. “Us drinking his maddingly expensive champagne to celebrate keeping your love for a bloke a secret from your psychopathic cousin – he’d be so proud.”

Regulus nearly choked on his drink, spluttering with laughter. “Oh, he’d rise from the grave just to join us,” he shot back, shaking his head in disbelief.

Isa howled with laughter, and without asking, she topped up their

glasses.

“Alright,” Regulus said firmly, raising a hand in mock warning. “Let’s stick to this. No more glasses.”

Isa smirked. “Of course. We’ll only drink two glasses.”

*****

They did not, in fact, drink only two glasses.

They finished the entire bottle, popped open another one, and then moved on to other kinds of poison, pouring drink after drink.

It turned into one of the best evenings of Regulus’s life — and that was saying something, considering the events earlier that really did push the balance in the opposite direction.

At some point, they dragged two sofas into the middle of the room, positioning them so they could lounge beside each other, talking without filter and laughing without boundary. Isa turned on the Wireless, and lively music filled the room as they celebrated.

And Isa dragged him to her improvised dance floor – forcing him to dance with her, to twirl her across the floor and to spin her around. She tried to mimic him as he threw in the world’s most ridiculous dance moves, but she failed spectacularly, sending them both into hysterics.

And he moved to the piano, playing all the stupid Muggle melodies she requested, his fingers fumbling over the keys as her singing filled the space and her exaggerated antics left him doubled with laughter, barely able to continue playing.

And they drank, they laughed, they danced and laughed some more, their joy carrying them late into the night.

How good it felt to be free.

*****

The first thing Regulus registered the next morning was the relentless, painful pounding in his head. It seemed to hammer against his skull, each beat sharp and agonising and forcing a low groan from his throat.

The second thing he noticed was Isa’s hoarse whisper, cutting through

the fog in his mind.

“Reg — I feel numb — can you just… are we wearing clothes?”

The oddity of her question barely registered through the haze of what was probably still lingering intoxication when he, without a second thought, shamelessly groped Isa, blindly confirming her state of dress, and then himself. His hand landed on her stomach – or maybe her hip; it was hard to tell in this state – to conclude that they seemed both, in fact, clothed.

“Yeah,” he croaked, his voice rasping with the effort, the act of speaking only worsening his headache.

“Great,” Isa groaned, her voice dripping with sleep and suffering. “Because I think in… precisely ten seconds, the door is going to open.”

And indeed, her prediction proved ridiculously accurate because barely seconds later, the door to the drawing room swung open with a merciless *bang*. The sudden flood of light through the doorway shot straight into Regulus’s pounding skull, offering him a glimpse of what hell must feel like. He hissed, holding his hand over his face.

“*Oh*,” Regulus groaned, his voice muffled against his hand. “*Don’t* do that.”

A burst of uproarious laughter met his ears and even without opening his eyes, Regulus knew who it was.

“Ah, the lovebirds at it again?” Barty’s voice drawled, laced with amusement.

“Fuck off, Crouch,” Regulus groaned, still shielding his eyes. “Close the bloody door.”

“Language, Black,” came Evan’s voice, barely holding back laughter. “There’s a Professor here, you know.”

Regulus froze for a second, his heart sinking as he heard a third voice.

“It is a complete mystery to me,” Thorne said with wry amusement, “why everyone insists on referring to me as their Professor when I am, in fact, no longer their Professor.”

Regulus groaned again, dragging a hand down his face. He could barely process the shock of Barty, Evan, and bloody Victor Thorne

standing in his drawing room because, somewhere in the foggy recesses of his mind – he remembered he had completely brought this on himself.

He had known Thorne would be here today to collect the latest edition of *The Pure Quill* and he *had*, somewhere in his blurry state at the train, indeed arranged to meet up with Barty and Evan this particular morning.

“How,” Regulus groaned, still not daring to open his eyes, “do I always forget that people are coming over here?”

“And how,” Isa added groggily, her voice laden with suffering, “do I always get caught inappropriately dressed in this bloody room by Professor Thorne? No offense, Professor.”

“None taken,” Thorne replied, his tone laced with mischief and amusement.

Regulus finally forced his eyes open, squinting against the harsh light; Barty and Evan stood in the doorway, Barty grinning wickedly while Evan looked torn between amusement and sympathy. Thorne stood a little behind them, his arms crossed, his eyes twinkling mischievously and the signature smirk plastered onto his face.

Regulus’s gaze swept the room, taking in the aftermath of last night’s revelry: half-eaten drumsticks scattered across a side table, empty bottles of champagne, brandy, and Merlin knew what else littering the piano, and two towering piles of precariously stacked books. Isa’s robes were crumpled on the floor and the ashtray on the table was nearly overflowing.

“What the *hell* did we do last night, Nott?” Regulus groaned.

Isa, wearing nothing but the silk dress she wore under her robes, groaned as she sat up, her hair a tangled mess and her face pale. The dress barely covered her thighs, and she winced as the motion visibly made the room spin.

Barty smirked, leaning against the doorframe. “Ah, that’s something we’re *all* dying to know, Black.”

Flashes of the previous night began to flicker in Regulus’s mind: Isa twirling him around the room in a drunken dance, him attempting to play the piano backward while she cheered him on, the two of them levitating books in a contest to see who could stack them the highest,

and Whiskerley, dutifully bringing them trays of food at Isa's increasingly bizarre requests.

His gaze landed on the overflowing ashtray, and another memory surfaced: him coughing violently as he attempted to smoke one of Isa's filthy Muggle cigarettes.

Regulus turned to Isa, his face twisting in disgust. "I smoked?"

Isa nodded, her voice hoarse. "Yeah."

"Bloody disgusting," Regulus muttered, shuddering. "No offense, Professor."

Thorne smirked, clearly amused. "None taken. I think I'll… go find some coffee and food while you two sort this out. What's the name of the House Elf again?"

"Whiskerley," Regulus answered, wincing as the name reminded him of whiskey and worsened his nausea.

Isa clearly felt the same as she groaned, clutching her head.

Regulus pushed himself off the sofa, wobbling as the room spun dangerously. He stumbled but managed to steady himself. "Just… a quick shower, and I'll be there, alright?"

Barty and Evan snickered as Regulus made his way to the door, one hand shielding his eyes from the light.

As Isa stood to follow, Regulus couldn't help but notice how the silk dress barely covered her, and his gaze flicked to Barty, who looked entirely too pleased. Evan, at least, had the decency to glance away, but Barty's smug, suggestive expression was unabashed. His eyes flicked between Regulus and Isa with unmistakable glee.

Regulus groaned inwardly — he knew it would be pointless to try and convince Barty that he hadn't so much as touched Isa. Not that they ever believed him, but after the events in the dormitory, that ship had truly sailed.

Regulus glared at him as he stumbled out of the room. "Eyes off her, Crouch."

Barty's laughter filled the room, rich and mocking.

"Could you guys clean up the room a bit?" Isa croaked as she followed

Regulus out of the room.

“Ah, you’re leaving *us* to clean up your mess?” Evan said, his voice a mix of teasing and annoyance.

“Yeah,” Isa nodded, her eyes still barely open. “I don’t trust myself with my wand now, Rosier. Might blow up the entire house in this state.”

*****

The shower did wonders – the pounding in his head subsided to such a manageable throb and the cool water woke him up well enough to feel like a marginally human being once he entered the drawing room again. Evan and Barty had clearly obeyed Isa, for the room had returned to its original state; it was clean, the air cleared of the disgusting smell of smoke and on the table breakfast was laid out.

Regulus wasn’t quite sure, though, whether he found the smell of eggs to be appetising or nauseating.

Isa sat at the table, properly dressed, hair braided and only the faint trace of fatigue under her eyes betraying she’d had a rough night. Evan and Barty were sharing some of their newly mastered spells with Thorne who looked highly amused.

“Apologies, Professor,” Regulus said as he slid into a chair at the table. “I completely forgot my friends were coming this morning.”

Thorne waved it off with one of his signature smirks. “No need to apologise. I guess it’s always a surprise what I walk into in this house.”

Regulus shifted in his seat a bit uncomfortable, not missing the slight blush colouring Isa’s cheeks. His discomfort was nothing compared to hers – she was, after all, the one who had unexpectedly bumped into Thorne barely clothed on multiple occasions. The fact that he was an acquaintance or friend from her father only made matters worse, of course.

She seemed to think about that, too.

“Err – yes, Professor,” she started, awkwardly fidgeting with the bracelets around her wrist. “I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t… tell my father about, you know…”

Evan and Barty burst into uproarious laughter, answered with a firm glare from Isa. Regulus barely managed to suppress his own laugh.

Thorne smirked. "Don't worry. I think we're all entitled to our… escapades as teenagers."

Isa nodded. "Thank you, Professor."

They all tucked into brunch; poached eggs, porridge, sausages, toast – Regulus gradually got used to the smell of food and started to enjoy it after a couple of bites.

Over a sip of coffee, Thorne's gaze flicked to Evan and Barty, his expression turning curious. "Do they…" he gestured to the pair with a slight nod, then locking gazes with Regulus, "...know what you're involved with?"

Regulus nodded, keeping his tone casual. "Yes. More or less."

Evan perked up immediately, his enthusiasm palpable. "Oh, you're here on… *business*, Professor?" He shot a knowing look at Barty, the gleam in his eyes betraying that his interest was spiked.

Thorne smiled faintly. "I am."

Barty leaned forward, clapping his hands in enthusiasm. "I knew it! You're active, aren't you? With the dueling club at Hogwarts and everything—"

Thorne chuckled, amused by their excitement. "Something like that, yes."

Although Thorne's initial purpose had been to pick up the template of the *Pure Quill,* he ended up staying for most of the afternoon. Barty and Evan bombarded him with questions, showing off their spells and eagerly soaking up his knowledge. Thorne indulged them like a mentor, offering advice and corrections with good humour.

"I can't wait for it to start, though," Barty breathed, his voice tinged with longing. "It's all been talk until now, but to actually fight—"

"Ah," Thorne interrupted with a knowing look, drawing on his slightly nauseating cigar, "but don't forget — all war requires preparation. Hours upon hours of covert work, especially when it comes to a revolution or a coup. This is no conventional warfare, Mr. Crouch."

Barty scowled slightly but remained undeterred.

“When will it start, though?” Evan asked eagerly, eying the Professor in awe who was now lounging back in the chair, a cigar on his lip.

“They might admit the first wave this summer,” Thorne explained. “But you still have two years of Hogwarts ahead of you—”

Barty cut him off, his voice impatient. “I don’t care about my stupid O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s, I’d drop out for the revolution immediately.”

Thorne regarded him calmly. “You might not care for your examinations, but there’s much to learn that will serve you in war — and, by extension, help the cause.”

Barty crossed his arms. “It’d still be brilliant to have people at Hogwarts already fighting the revolution. That’d give us a clear advantage over the modernists, wouldn’t it?”

Thorne chuckled. “And you don’t think the modernists are recruiting at Hogwarts?”

The room fell silent. This spiked Regulus’s attention – he’d never really thought about it; never thought past individuals that might, at some time, perhaps join the modernists. But to recruit them already at Hogwarts… Frankly, it was only logical, if *they* were recruiting, assessing… surely the modernists were, too.

Isa nodded in contemplation, her gaze fixed on Thorne.

“Who would join them, though?” Evan asked septically. “We outnumber them easily, right? We’ve got all the Slytherin families, at least.”

Regulus considered this. Yes, they had the Rosiers, Crabbes, Selwyns, Greengrasses, Ackworths — all the obvious families.

“There are some powerful pureblood families on their side, though, Mr. Rosier,” Thorne pointed out.

Barty and Evan exchanged glances, clearly trying to think of examples.

“Well, there’s Potter, of course,” Barty said sourly.

Regulus purposely avoided Isa’s eyes, certain that she was doing the same.

Oh, if only his friends knew.

To his surprise, Isa entered the conversation too. “There’s more, though, isn’t there? The Fortescues, the Longbottoms…”

Regulus wasn’t the only one who looked puzzled at Isa’s assessment.

“We had a lot to do with them during the Unity Project last year,” Isa explained. “It’s pretty clear they’re modernists — and from powerful families, too.”

Barty winced sympathetically. “Oh, yes. I forget all the time that you two had to go through that. Teaming up with those modernists… And you, Black, having to attend Beauxbatons with *Potter* of all people.”

Regulus stiffened, then composed himself. He avoided looking at Isa, taking a measured sip of coffee. “It was fine. I didn’t have much to do with him.”

He felt the tension radiating from Isa, almost like she was about to laugh.

Thorne gave him a contemplative look, one that made Regulus deeply uncomfortable. Thorne knew, after all — at least that Regulus had shared a dorm with Potter. Regulus truly hoped he wouldn’t spill that detail to Barty and Evan.

“Good to see you’re preparing mentally and magically for what’s ahead,” Thorne said, smoothly changing the subject. “And also you…”

Thorne gave Barty a knowing look. A tense silence followed.

“Yes,” Barty nodded sourly. “I’ll have to prove myself, won’t I?”

Thorne smiled faintly. “Yes, but don’t worry. Family isn’t everything.”

Regulus huffed. “Look at my brother, Barty. The heir of one of the most noble and ancient families, and he won’t be fighting on our side, that’s for sure.”

Evan frowned. “You really think he’ll fight for the modernists?”

Regulus thought of this – Sirius would fight for the modernists only if it were just to piss off Mother, or to prove his loyalty to the Potters or to finally stand up to the people who’d crossed him during his childhood. Even Regulus himself, although completely sympathising with the Revolution, felt the bitter taste of having to fight at the side

of Bellatrix, to be forced to call her his ally. Though, he had to admit, having to fight *against* her wasn't really appealing, either…

He sighed. "Yes. I'm sure he will."

The room fell quiet again, save for the sounds of eating and drinking.

"I'll fight, too," Isa said suddenly.

Regulus didn't think as he suddenly blurted out, "No bloody hell, you won't."

The ferocity of the statement took even himself by surprise – he knew what it was based on; the idea of Isa fighting actively, physically, alongside the likes of Dolohov, the Lestranges… And, he knew, too, how bait worked in war, and Isa – Isa would be a real prize to capture. A treasured hostage. A ransom worth paying. Especially considering she was the eldest Nott daughter – and Magnus Nott's enemies were plenty.

Still, despite understanding all this — despite harbouring these reservations for so long — he knew it wasn't his decision to make and his objection had come out too forcefully – too fiercely at least to sugarcoat.

Isa raised an eyebrow and slowly turned her head towards him, her gaze hardening into a challenging glare.

Barty and Evan, in the meantime, smirked, clearly enjoying the unfolding exchange between Regulus and Isa.

"I'm a better duelist than all of you," she countered.

Regulus was pretty sure that he was a better duellist than her, but yes – she might've been better than Barty and Evan.

Thorne, who was also clearly entertained by the growing tension, cut in with an amused, knowing smile. "I wonder what your father would think of that, Miss Nott."

Isa rolled her eyes, annoyed by how close to home that landed. One of her greatest grievances was, after all, the power patriarchy held over her and the fact that her father played a crucial role in all her life decisions.

Then, as if another realisation had dawned, the corner of her lips

curled slightly. “When the time comes, it’ll probably be my husband’s decision, not my father’s.”

Regulus very purposefully didn’t look at her and ignored the enormous, awkward elephant in the room; the fact that her husband would, in all likelihood, be him eventually. And the fact that everyone in this room was aware of it only made the moment more unbearable.

Barty and Evan, as always, found the whole thing hilarious, practically beaming at his discomfort.

Evan, grinning broadly, leaned back and looked at Regulus with deliberate amusement. “Your father’s a bit terrifying, Nott. I wouldn’t want to cross him if I were your husband.”

Regulus couldn’t suppress the snort coming out of his nose. He smirked and nodded in agreement with an exaggerated flair.

Honestly, Evan wasn’t wrong.

“Yeah – count on your husband not approving, Nott.”

Barty and Evan sniggered.

Isa, as always utterly unfazed, tilted her head. “Oh,” she drawled, her voice laced with challenge and innuendo. “I think I’ll know a few ways to persuade my husband when the time comes.”

She met Regulus’s gaze, locking onto him.

It took him just a fraction too long to process what she meant, and then choked on his food, sputtering. Evan, caught just as off guard, nearly choked on his coffee across from him.

Barty, on the other hand, roared with laughter, nodding approvingly as he high-fived Isa with glee.

*****

Thorne had visited Black Manor for a reason, though, so eventually he and Regulus excused themselves to the library to go over the text Regulus had prepared.

Thorne nodded approvingly as he scanned the parchment.

“Excellent. You always find a way to connect current events to previous editions of *The Quill* – Very good.”

Regulus inclined his head slightly, a touch awkward.

“I’ll take this,” Thorne continued, folding the parchment neatly, “and make sure it’s distributed among the subscribers.”

Regulus was preparing to leave the library and return to his friends in the drawing room when Thorne stopped him.

“Regulus,” he called, thoughtfully.

Regus blinked, slightly taken aback – Thorne never used his first name, always stuck to ‘Mr. Black’.

“You might…” Thorne started with a sigh, “want to think about security for your house.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow.

What?

Thorne exhaled, looking at him meaningfully. “For now, it’s just me and your friends stumbling into your drawing room, interrupting you and your—” he paused, lips twitching, “—girlfriend. But next time, it could be someone with bad intentions.”

Regulus had never really thought about that – had always considered Black Manor to be an open house. Uncle Alphard had loved the buzz of people coming and going, had always liked his nieces and nephews around. And when Seacliff Hall had been closed down, Black Manor had become the obvious choice for everyone to gather, turning it more into a public space than Uncle Alphard’s private estate.

But yes, Uncle Alphard was dead, and the house was now his.

Thorne nodded knowingly. “We’re at war, Regulus. And you’re in one of the highest ranks. Better start acting like it – take your security seriously.”

Silence stretched between them as they stepped into the hallway. Then, casually, Thorne added, “And it wouldn’t hurt to close off the fireplace in general. Even to family.”

Thorne shot him a pointed look.

Bellatrix.

He huffed, almost amused at the thought of barring her from his

house. Still, he nodded. “Thank you, Professor.”

They continued walking, nearing the drawing room, when Regulus suddenly spoke.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Thorne stopped, turning to him.

Regulus met his gaze. “Isa,” he clarified. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

Thorne studied him for a long moment. His gaze was, as always, unreadable and penetrating.

Then, finally, he nodded. “Yes, I know.”

And there was something in the way he said it — the way his eyes flickered, the way the corners of his mouth lifted ever so slightly — that left Regulus with a very, *very* unnerving feeling.

Chapter End Notes

> Can't believe I'm almost done writing the second book already... There's going to be 27 chapters, though (it said 25 but that excludes the prologue/epilogue). What a ride. ♥

Chapter 22: Of Mothers & Punches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Regulus filled most of the Easter holidays with endless homework and revisions – O.W.L.s were taken in a matter of two months, and as they coincided with the last Quidditch match, he knew that he wouldn't have a lot of time once back at Hogwarts.

Isa spent most of the nights at her own house – her father was in Damascus leaving Mrs. Nott alone with Isa's sisters – but spent many days studying alongside him. Evan, too, was around much of the time; his father was busy with the revolution and Evan was clearly bored home alone with his mother. Barty, too, spent several days at Black Manor, but Regulus had the distinct impression that he was torn between enjoying time with his friends and being close to his rather isolated mother. Regulus never pried – he knew better than anyone else how important it was to keep stuff, especially familial stuff, private – but the snippets of information offered by Evan was enough to conclude that Mr. Crouch was too busy to tend to his family; and with a wife who was mentally troubled in some way, it was clearly taking its toll on Barty. Regulus didn't really know what to do – this was more of Evan's territory anyway – but to open his doors to Black Manor and offer a kind of distraction for him when he needed to get away.

Besides hanging around with his friends and working through O.W.L. material he filled his days with reading some new books he'd retrieved in Manchester and by trying – very hard – not to think of Potter. It worked, more or less, although he still wore the pin Potter had given him at Christmas, tucked just inside the band of his T-shirt, brushing his skin just enough to remind him it was there — and to let him know if it ever glowed. It hadn't glowed once during the holidays. He knew it was for the best; the less he thought about Potter, the better.

He had more success with his new books – being too busy with everything at Beauxbatons, endless Quidditch practices, homework and Occlumency, Regulus felt like he hadn't properly read for ages – at least not the way he liked to; for hours on end, on topics that he actually cared about, on things that actually mattered. He'd left the Manchester bookstore with armfuls of recommendations from the owner, eager to dive in.

So, by the time the holidays ended and Regulus found himself in the way too cramped compartment at the Hogwarts Express, he was again reading, trying to block out their banter and the antics of Isa, Amaryllis and Melania, who – for a change – had decided to join them in the compartment rather than finding one on their own. Regulus was seated at the window while he tried to ignore the sensations of Evan's elbow poking in his side every time he laughed at someone's joke – which was, honestly, very often.

He glanced up briefly when the girls burst into raucous laughter at one of Avery's jokes before rolling his eyes and returning to his book. He saw that Severus was doing the same across the compartment.

His focus shattered, though, when a sharp pain shot through his shin.

"The fuck?" Regulus hissed, glaring at Mulciber and Avery, both grinning like they'd pulled off some grand prank.

"Oi, Black," Mulciber drawled with a smirk. "What're you reading, mate? You seem pretty into it."

"Something *hot*, by any chance?" Avery added, prompting a round of laughter from the compartment.

Regulus rolled his eyes, a reluctant smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He was just thinking of a witty retort when Mulciber swiped the book from his hands.

"Ah, of course," he groaned theatrically while flipping through it. "In bloody French."

He tossed the book to Barty, who caught it with a grin. "Yes, Black likes to read in languages us mere mortals can't understand."

Regulus resisted the urge to point out that French was hardly an obscure language — and that at least three people in the compartment spoke it fluently, but decided to let it slide to focus instead on retrieving the book as soon as possible, at least before any of the francophone people in the compartment–

Shit. Too late.

In rapid succession, Barty had lobbed the book to Amaryllis, who, laughing, had thrown it to Melania; one of the three people Regulus was sure spoke French.

She squinted at the text before raising an eyebrow. “Oh, but this isn’t just a book…”

Regulus groaned inwardly, already bracing himself for what was coming.

“It’s a *play*,” she declared, her voice dripping with amusement as she flipped through the pages.

The rest of the compartment dissolved into laughter.

“Give it back,” Regulus snapped, snatching the book from Melania.

“Never knew you were so theatrical, Black,” Avery grinned.

“Yes, what’s this stuff for poofs, mate?” Mulciber added with a smirk.

Although he truly, really tried to suppress the reaction, he couldn’t help but stiffen at the slur. He cast a quick, instinctive glance toward Isa, catching her eyes for a fleeting second before looking away.

“This,” he groaned, feeling the sudden urge to explain, “is not just a *play*.”

He looked at the sceptical glances of his friends.

“Well, go on then,” Barty smirked, gesturing to the floor in a theatrical fashion. He was probably reminded of all those times Regulus would – often futilely – try to explain world politics or ethical dilemmas to his friends. “Explain.”

“Alright,” he sighed, encouraged by Isa’s slightly amused face. She was, after all, bombarded with philosophical thoughts and political insights by Regulus on a regular basis. “So, the play takes place in the early 1900s in Russia – Muggle Russia, of course,” he added quickly, for clarity, “and it focuses on a group of revolutionaries who want to assassinate the Grand Duke – basically the leader of the country at that moment.”

He paused, noting that the compartment had gone unusually quiet.

“So they want to overthrow the regime and liberate the country for the people. There’s the Revolutionary Kaliayev, who is supposed to throw the bomb – basically the Muggle version of our spell *Bombarda* – but then he notices that, when he is about to do it, the Duke is accompanied by children.”

“So he doesn’t do it?” Amaryllis asked, leaning forward.

“Of course he did, right?” Mulciber scoffed. “Who cares about the kids? You don’t waste a shot at the tyrant.”

Regulus smiled faintly. “That’s the dilemma Kaliayev faces. In the end, he decides not to do it.”

“What happens next?” Melania asked, her curiosity piqued.

“So eventually, Kaliayev does manage to kill him, but he has a big price to pay for it – the knowledge that he’s taken a life, the fact that his life will be taken as he will be executed…”

Evan tilted his head. “Alright, so what’s the point?”

“There’s no neat moral,” Regulus explained, his voice gaining strength. “It’s just – it makes you think; how far can we go without losing it? Can we achieve justice via violence, via blood and murder? And when is killing for the greater good – and where do we draw the line?”

Avery groaned. “Uplifting stuff, Black.”

Regulus snorted. “It’s not supposed to be uplifting – but it’s *real*. Look, the book was written almost twenty years ago and covers a Muggle revolution about sixty years ago – and look, just look how applicable it is to our situation; because these things, these dilemmas, they are universal, see?”

“Well,” Barty said thoughtfully, “if I could kill Minchum but there were kids around, I’d do it. The greater good and all that.”

“That’s vile, Crouch,” Isa said sharply. “Why should the kids pay for Minchum’s policies?”

“Besides,” Mulciber grinned, “you could just ask your dad to bring you along to work and kill him there — no kids involved.”

The conversation ended with Barty throwing a Leg-Locker jinx at Mulciber, who roared with laughter. “Sorry, mate, it was too easy.”

*****

Regulus was too distracted by the little jinx war that had broken out between Avery, Barty, Mulciber and Evan and continued well into dinner in the Great Hall to make sure that he sat with his back to the

rest of the students.

He told himself it was merely practical – dodging a particularly nasty jinx from Avery aimed at Evan had left him no choice but to take this seat. It wasn't instinct. It wasn't because some part of him had been drawn, inexorably, toward the Gryffindor table, where a particular individual might be sitting.

He forced himself to focus — on his friends, on his plate, on anything but the rest of the Hall. But it truly didn't help that everyone was already seated and settled well into dinner when the group of four arrived, sauntering into the Hall like they owned the place – Sirius, the werewolf, that daft Pettigrew bloke and, of course, Potter.

And really, truly, Regulus tried to look away, to stop his gaze at Sirius and not let it wander to his neighbour, who would, without a doubt be–

Potter.

Two weeks. He hadn't seen him for two weeks, but it felt like months. Regulus knew it was only logical; he'd worked weeks on pushing the existence of James Potter to the periphery of his mind, to smother it with memories not involving him, to bury it with other associations, other people, other feelings and other thoughts, to the extent that he was nothing more than a distant memory, covered by layers and layers of Regulus's very core, so he wouldn't be found there, in his mind.

And now, with one look, it was as if all the layers, all the smothering, all the burying had completely vanished like smoke, leaving his soul, his heart open, bare and exposed for all of the feelings, all the emotions to flood him.

The sensation was so intense, so visceral that he actually physically reacted, like he was slapped in his face. The moment he saw Potter sitting at the Gryffindor table, he couldn't help but jolt slightly in his seat, his fingers clenching too tightly around his fork.

How much he missed him.

It was so unnatural and so unfair that he was forced to shun away from it, to turn his back towards it, to the familiarity of him. He was sure he was the only one who knew about that sensitive spot behind his ear and that when you kissed it, it always, *always* drew the same, distinct sound from his lips – a mix between a whimper and a sigh.

And Regulus was sure, too, that only he knew that he liked to draw lines on another person's body with his index finger and his ring finger, his middle finger always missing from the motion. And Regulus knew for sure, too, that only he could summon the feeling of Potter's hair between his fingers instantly, and the feeling of his two – yes, two – crowns; probably the reason why his hair was so untamable in the first place. Every part of him — his movements, the different heights and tones of his voice, his fingers, every eyelash — had grown so familiar, so comforting. And now, all of it felt so strange, oddly foreign –

And then Regulus realised – Potter *did* look different.

He couldn't pinpoint it – but there was something off. The way he joined in Sirius's laughter just a fraction of a second too late. The way he caught the object Dora Macmillan tossed at him with just a bit too much strain. There was something off. Something was wrong.

Regulus might have kept studying him, searching for the answer, if not for the burning sensation of Isa's gaze on him. He groaned inwardly — Isa's sharp eyes would have caught everything; the way he shifted in his seat, the way his grip tightened around his fork, every flicker of emotion that had crossed his face.

He tore his eyes away, forcing him to look at the food on his plate while also doing an exquisite job at dodging Isa's curious and slightly judgmental glares.

*****

The question of what could possibly be up with Potter consumed Regulus, but he had no one to turn to with his concerns or questions. Regulus had come to conclude quickly that it hadn't been a fit of fatigue or illness, because Potter had looked off the entire week; he laughed and he talked, but the twinkling eyes and the air of unmatched enthusiasm was conspicuously absent. Even before the Easter holidays, when things had already gone south between him and Potter, Potter had looked better than this – so whatever it was had to be something else.

The only reason he didn't obsess over it was because he just couldn't – the teachers had wasted no time bombarding them with homework and endless O.W.L. speeches, and in the meantime, things were developing rapidly regarding the revolution. Not a day passed without news of some row in the Wizengamot, some duel between Ministry

workers, some incident in magical shopping streets or some uproarious opinion article about the current state of the magical world. Regulus knew he wasn't included in many meetings – he couldn't even attend them outside the holidays – so he didn't have many details, and the last meeting he *had* been rather distracted; but he knew it, felt it. They were going somewhere. It was about to start. About to commence. There'd be some inauguration of some kind and that'd be it. The starting signal, the igniting of the fire.

He wasn't the only one to notice – on the contrary, the entire castle seemed to discuss politics, comb through the Daily Prophet during breakfast and there was a continuous, palpable tension in the air with Mudbloods moving around in tight groups and Slytherins throwing out slurs here and there.

Unfortunately, contrary to last year when they'd been able to discuss politics with Thorne, they now had some Ministry approved dork teaching them Defence against the Dark Arts – and she was clearly instructed to avoid the topics of politics and revolution at all costs. This mounted in very strange and uncomfortable classes, where the Gryffindors tried to push her to talk about these things just to be validated in their stances and ideas, and Slytherins pushed it in the same way but to just for the fun of riling her – and the non-Slytherins – up in the process.

Worst of them, alarmingly but not surprisingly so, was Barty. Regulus felt that Barty's dismay about the world and the Ministry's politics had actually little to do with said world and politics and more with the fact that they illustrated everything his father stood for, but the effect was all the same.

So, it did take rather little for the fuse to light the fire when in their second class after the holidays, the Gryffindor Taylor asked about the Wizengamot pushing through another set of laws prolonging Azkaban sentences and making parole basically impossible.

"Professor, what do you think about the new Azkaban laws?"

As to be expected, Professor Gaskin stiffened, clearly caught off guard. "I don't think this is a politics class, Mr. Taylor. Today, we're discussing–"

"Serves them right, doesn't it?" a Gryffindor muttered loudly in the front. "The terrorists."

Apparently, Evan couldn't help himself. "Who's the *real* terrorist,

though?"

Regulus winced.

In essence, Evan was right – the last year alone, the Azkaban laws had become so much stricter that it was starting to look like an autocratic state; even more so considering that the current 'state of emergency' allowed for the Wizengamot to be bypassed in so many important decisions, thereby leaving the centre of power in the hands of a considerate small group of people.

Still, Regulus knew that it was still better to lay low; with the Minchum administration in power still, they'd better wait until the formal start of the Revolution. It wouldn't take long; it could happen any time now.

Taylor looked vivid. "The ones in prison, obviously."

Before Professor Gaskin could regain control, the room erupted into chaos; Gryffindors jeered all kinds of slurs, Slytherins shouted back and insults flew back and forth with growing nastiness.

Barty stood abruptly, shooting the group of Gryffindors a disgusted gaze. "The *real* terrorist here," he spat, "is this pathetic administration that needs all these laws to stay in power in the first place!"

Crabbe cheered. "Yeah!"

"Yeah, power with the people!"

Taylor smirked, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sure your father's proud to have a son like you, Crouch."

The room went silent.

Barty's face darkened, and in one fluid motion, he drew his wand. Regulus knew it was too late before he could intervene – and indeed, instantly, a jet of light shot toward Taylor.

"*ENOUGH!* " Professor Gaskin screamed, but the class was already in pure chaos.

Regulus exchanged a quick, alarmed glance with Evan, and they sprang into action – they both knew it wasn't wise to keep Barty around any of the Gryffindors. Each grabbed one of Barty's arms and dragged him toward the door. Regulus shot the professor an

apologetic look. “Sorry, Professor, but perhaps it’s better if we… handle this.”

Without waiting for her response, they hauled Barty out into the corridor.

Barty stormed ahead of them, his fists clenched, his breathing ragged. Regulus and Evan followed him silently toward the grounds. The sun was warm and golden as they reached the lake, the nearing shift from spring into summer evident in the air.

They settled down by the water in complete silence, the atmosphere neither really comfortable nor tense.

After a moment, Regulus stood, wandered to the shore, and picked up a handful of flat stones. He walked back to Barty and held them out.

Barty glanced at him, then nodded, taking a few. Wordlessly, they began skipping stones across the lake’s surface.

“Oi, mate,” Evan said to Regulus after a while. “Swing it harder.”

Regulus threw another, the stone skimming the surface but not far.

“Well, we all know why you’re a Seeker,” Evan smirked.

Barty snorted, loosening up. His throws grew wilder and more exaggerated, and soon the three of them were laughing as their stones splashed erratically into the water.

Regulus laughed. “Come on, Crouch. Just imagine Taylor standing there. Hit him square in his ugly face.”

Barty let out a genuine laugh, throwing a stone with renewed vigour.

They kept at it until their laughter faded into quiet, the only sound the soft ripple of the lake.

“Gotta be careful, Barty,” Regulus said finally, his voice low. “Don’t give them a reason to expel you.”

Barty sighed, lying back on the grass. “Yeah, I know.”

Evan grinned. “And don’t let them take your prefect badge, mate. We need a prefect on our team.”

And at that, all three burst out laughing.

*****

Still, neither his concerns about Barty, nor the anticipation regarding the political state of the world could completely smother Regulus's concern about or preoccupation with Potter. Potter had left every practice almost immediately; he'd switched to rounding up on the pitch, therefore avoiding the need to go into the locker room and potentially finding himself privately in a closed room with Regulus. In the weeks leading up to the Easter holidays, Regulus would've been pleased by this – but now, as he just couldn't let go of that nagging feeling, it annoyed him tremendously that he couldn't find a seemingly spontaneous moment to ask about his wellbeing.

So again, on Saturday afternoon after practice, Regulus trudged back toward the castle on his own. It was late-April and the sun cast a warm glow over the grounds, the long grass brushing against his shoes as he made his way up the path.

Lost in thought about the newest edition of *The Pure Quill* he had to write, he suddenly spotted Lupin standing off to the side of the path, all alone. Regulus immediately noticed that the nearest group of students was too far away to distinguish them, let alone overhear them.

And then, then Regulus realised there *was* a way, there *was* a person to turn to with his questions. He hesitated for only a moment before the impulse overtook him. It was now or never, wasn't it?

He approached hurriedly, his footsteps crunching against the gravel.

"Lupin."

Lupin turned, startled. Regulus couldn't really blame him – they truly barely spoke to each other, and never voluntarily, nor initiated by Regulus.

He raised an eyebrow when he realised it was, in fact, Regulus Arcturus Black – brother to one of his best friends, former lover to the other – talking to him. "Black?"

Regulus's voice was stiff, almost cold. "What's up with Potter?"

Lupin's other eyebrow joined the first. "What?"

"Obviously, there's something going on," Regulus pressed, his annoyance growing. "So tell me – what is it?"

Lupin crossed his arms, his expression sceptical. “What makes you think there’s something going on?”

“Don’t pretend I’m daft, Lupin,” Regulus snapped, the words sharp. “I know –” he quickly paused, suppressing the urge to continue with ‘him better than most’, “ –there is something wrong.”

Lupin tilted his head, considering him. “Alright then… why do you care?”

The question threw Regulus off guard – he blinked, caught between surprise and confusion. “What?” He quickly shook it off, annoyance flaring again. “Just tell me — did something happen over the holidays? Is everything alright?”

Lupin’s expression shifted, a flicker of something almost amused crossing his face. “You actually care.”

“What?” Regulus bristled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Lupin didn’t answer immediately, and the pause only irritated Regulus more. Couldn’t the annoying werewolf just answer the bloody question? It was hardly Arithmancy or Runes he was asking him to spell out for him.

Then he realised what Lupin implied.

“Ah,” Regulus said dryly, his voice thick with sarcasm. “My brother’s been telling tales about me not having a heart and all that?”

A small, knowing smile tugged at the corner of Lupin’s lips. “Ah, so it’s a matter of the heart with James, then?”

Regulus stiffened, his irritation boiling over. “Sod off, Lupin, and tell me what’s wrong with him.”

Lupin decided to drop his teasing edge as if just now realising that Regulus had actually asked him a question. His tone turned serious and his eyes concerned. “It’s… it’s his mum.”

Regulus’s heart sank.

No.

Of all things, of all possibilities – it could *not* be his mother. No.

He stared, lips parting slightly as dread crept in. “What — what’s

wrong with his mum?"

Lupin sighed, his tone heavy, looking around uncomfortably. "She's sick. Really sick. They don't know exactly what it is, but… it's bad. They're worried."

Regulus swallowed hard. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He hesitated, then asked, quieter, "And how… how's he?"

Lupin studied him with open curiosity, his expression a mix of scepticism and faint surprise. "You really *do* care."

For heaven's sake – this bloke really couldn't just answer a bloody question now, could he?

"Fuck you, Lupin," Regulus shot back, his voice biting. "Why is that so surprising?"

"I just…" Lupin trailed off, his brow furrowing thoughtfully. "I don't understand you."

Regulus arched an eyebrow, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Yes, I'm a bloody enigma, Lupin. Don't try to unravel me — it might go over your head."

Lupin ignored the jab. "Why… him? Why James?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Aren't you a *brilliant* friend, if you need me to spell that out for you."

Lupin's lips quirked into a small smile, but then his expression turned tense. "Shit. This… this is actually serious," he muttered, almost to himself.

Regulus ignored him, not at all liking the direction in which the conversation was going. He knew he wouldn't get any more information out of him, and he'd told him already what he really had to know. "Well, nice catching up, Lupin," he shot before he turned to leave.

Bloody useless werewolf.

"I know what you did."

Regulus froze mid-step.

What?

This spiked his interest. Slowly, he turned back, his expression carefully blank. “What?”

“Lily told me,” Lupin said quietly. “She told me what you did at the New Year’s Reception.”

Of course she did.

Regulus’s jaw tightened. “Ah. Reliable, isn’t she? As I recall, I specifically asked her *not* to tell anyone.”

Lupin shrugged. “She told me as part of our prefect duties, you know…”

Regulus thought that was really a stretch, but decided to let it slide. The less attention he paid to this, the better. So, he started to turn again, dismissive and indifferent.

“Why?”

He stopped. “What?”

“Why did you do it?” Lupin asked, his tone genuinely curious. “Why help her?”

Regulus let out a sharp breath. “Again, what a stellar friend you are, Lupin, that I have to explain that to you.”

“It just doesn’t make sense…” Lupin said thoughtfully, almost to himself.

Regulus shrugged. “It does to me.”

And with that, he walked away, leaving Lupin standing there, frowning after him.

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The fact that Regulus now at least knew what was up with Potter did little to ease his concerns. No, he’d gotten a clear picture of Potter’s relationship with his Mum and it was very likely that his world would shatter if anything were to happen to her. Mrs. Potter was the centre of Potter’s universe, and without her, it could hardly remain spinning.

With that came a dilemma, though – Regulus and him were factually nothing to each other anymore. They’d finally, after so much trial and error, fallen in the dynamics of being acquaintances, being

involuntarily connected through the Quidditch team only. They'd let themselves go – for months they'd crossed every boundary that existed, and, honestly, they had barely survived; if Isa hadn't helped him for weeks probing in his mind and rebuilding his mental barriers, and even surrendering her body – the most private version of herself to him in the process, he and Potter wouldn't have lived today. So yes, it was for the better. He could hardly make Isa's sacrifice meaningless.

And still, deep down, under the surface of so many rationalisations and calculations, he wanted to ask him – ask Potter how he was doing, if there was any way to help him.

When Sirius bolted after practice, saying about meeting Lupin, Regulus found himself alone with Potter for the first time in weeks. Potter seemed deep in thought – so deep, even, that he didn't seem to register that he was now alone with Regulus; something he'd had avoided at all costs for weeks.

Regulus knew this was his chance and knew he had to seize it before Potter realised they were, in fact, alone, and managed to flee from the room.

Potter was in the process of putting on his shoes, completely oblivious to Regulus staring at him some yards away.

Eventually the silence stretched too long for Regulus's liking and he cleared his throat.

"You Mum's ill."

Potter's head snapped up, his hazel eyes confused. He glanced around the room and concluded it was empty. "How do you know?"

Regulus decided not to rat the werewolf out and ignored the question. "How are you?" he asked, trying to properly find Potter's eyes.

Potter, however, seemed torn between either fleeing the room or ignoring Regulus's question while the silence stretched.

Regulus sighed and moved closer.

"Alright," he said. "So, what are we doing, Potter? Punching or crying?"

Potter bliked, utterly surprised, tilting his head with confusion plain in his eyes. "What?"

“I’m asking you — what do you choose; punching or crying?”

Potter scoffed in a mixture of annoyance and confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t be so weird, Black.”

He seemed very eager to leave the room, but Regulus strategically blocked the exit and shrugged.

“I’m serious, Potter,” he urged. “They’re both great outlets.” His lips quirked in a faint smile. “Some bloke showed them to me once or twice. So — what’s it going to be? Punch or cry.”

Potter scoffed, but there was a waver in his voice. “Oh — I *do* want to punch you. Have been wanting to for a while now.”

Regulus felt a pang of something in his gut at these words — the realisation that Potter had probably wanted to punch him ever since he found out about Isa, or perhaps since he found out about the Dark Lord. He quickly let it slide and instead stepped forward, spreading his arms theatrically.

“Alright. Let’s go then.”

To Regulus’s surprise, though, Potter didn’t punch him squarely in the chest or on his arms — which he’d braced himself for — but instead his breath hitched. “But I think — I —”

He didn’t finish his sentence as a sob broke through Potter’s facade of anger.

Regulus sighed wryly and quickly stepped closer and wrapped his arms around him as Potter collapsed into his chest. He guided him to sit on one of the benches, gently stroking Potter’s hair as he cried into his body.

Immediately, Regulus’s throat turned dry with emotion. Potter, always the untroubled, the cheerful one whose banter, mischief and twinkling eyes were limitless, was now crying against his chest, clutching Regulus’s shirt.

“*Fuck*,” Potter whispered, his voice breaking.

“It’s alright,” Regulus murmured, continuing to stroke his hair.

Potter pulled back slightly, his face streaked with tears, his eyes pleading. “She can’t die,” he choked out. “She just can’t. She’s…

everything."

Regulus nodded. He knew.

Potter returned to Regulus's chest, where Regulus took in the scent of him, of his hair brushing against his chin and lips, and then, without a second thought, pressed his lips to his head in a comforting embrace until the tears subsided into silence.

Regulus had no words – no advice, no reassuring thoughts; he had nothing to offer but his arms around him, his chest against him and his lips pressed to his hair.

He had no idea how long they sat there, the tears having died out and a serene, calm quiet surrounding them. A mix of emotions waved through him – compassion for Potter who he'd never really seen so lost before, concern for Mrs. Potter and what her dying might mean for Potter and, strangely enough, a calm he hadn't felt for so long. As if for once, he was exactly where he was supposed to be; there, in the locker room, with James Potter seeking comfort in his arms.

The silence was eventually broken by Potter.

"Reg…" he began, his voice quiet. He pulled back slightly to interlock their gazes. "How – why –"

Before he could finish, though, the quiet calm in the locker room was brutally disturbed by the sound of birds. Two owls swooped into the room, dropping rolled copies of the Daily Prophet into their laps.

Both utterly startled by this sudden interruption, Regulus and Potter simultaneously unrolled the paper.

Regulus's pulse spiked as he read the headline.

BREAKING NEWS | Evening Edition
MASS ATTACK SHAKES WIZARDING COMMUNITY
Prominent Activists Targeted in Brutal Assault

The Wizarding world was plunged into shock this evening after a coordinated attack left two prominent rights activists dead and four others injured in what appears to be a deliberate and targeted assault.

Edgar Crumb, a leading voice in the Squib rights movement, was found lifeless in his cottage near Godric's Hollow. His decades of work advocating

for equal treatment of Squibs within wizarding society earned him respect but also dangerous enemies.

Another victim has been identified as Marigold Fenner, a fiery Muggleborn rights campaigner known for her tireless efforts to bridge the gap between Muggleborn witches and wizards and their pure-blood counterparts. She was attacked outside her residence in East Anglia late this afternoon.

Four others, whose names have not yet been released, were grievously injured but managed to Apparate or be transported to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries in time. Healers at St. Mungo's have assured the public they are working around the clock to stabilise their conditions.

At present, the motives behind these heinous attacks remain unclear. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has issued a statement confirming that Aurors have been dispatched and an investigation is underway. "We urge all witches and wizards to remain vigilant," said spokesperson Ambrose Thickett. "Those with information should come forward immediately."

The Daily Prophet will continue to follow this story as it develops. Turn to page 3 for more details on Edgar Crumb's legacy and page 5 for a profile on Marigold Fenner's tireless activism.

We mourn their loss and urge our readers to stand united in the face of darkness.

The silence that had been so peaceful before had turned tense and incredibly painful. Regulus flinched as he felt Potter enlarging the distance between them as he read, shifting away from him inch by inch, his shoulders stiffening.

When Potter broke the silence again, his voice was low and bitter, and his lips pressed into a thin line. “Of course.”

He stood abruptly, holding the paper up with a mirthless snort and gave Regulus a pointed look. “Of course.”

And then, shaking his head, he walked out the locker room.

****

Regulus was both confused and annoyed as he returned to the castle. It was the closest he had been to Potter since weeks, and the most

intimate since way longer than that. He hadn't felt that peaceful with Potter for ages, and then – of course then – a breaking news edition of the Prophet had to disrupt it and underscore in the nastiest way possible the incompatibility of them. The reason why it'd never work.

He groaned at his own naivety – of course they were incompatible, of course they'd never work; he didn't need a Prophet article to tell him that. It truly was better to stay away from him; every time he took a step closer, reality swooped in to brutally remind them why they'd distanced themselves in the first place. It was so much better to spare themselves all the anger, irritation and misery.

With this thought, Regulus entered the common room. He was momentarily surprised not to see his friends in their usual corner of the room when he realised they were in one of the empty classrooms in the Dungeon practising spells as part of their 'Club'.

It took Regulus just a tad too long to realise that their corner wasn't empty, though, and that Isa was reading a book on one of the sofas. Her presence startled him, and he slightly jolted as he considered his options – either continue to the dormitory and take a shower, or make some smalltalk; at least pretending that he hadn't just spent an hour or so with Potter in the locker room.

Apparently, though, the guilt was plain on his face.

"You were with Potter," Isa stated, her voice laced with judgement and accusation.

Regulus sighed.

And then, equally surprising Isa and himself, he gestured for Isa to rise from her seat. She did so – albeit sceptically – before coming to stand in front of him.

He took another deep breath.

"Punch me, Nott."

Isa's scepticism turned to outright surprise, her expression flickering with confusion and slight discomfort. "W–what?"

Regulus shrugged. "Well, apparently I'm asking people to punch me today – might as well roll with it."

Isa's face betrayed that Regulus was, in fact, clarifying nothing.

“Is this… the effect Potter has on you?” she asked, utterly baffled.

“C’mon, Nott,” Regulus urged.

Isa raised an eyebrow. “Why would I want to punch you?”

Regulus shrugged. “You’re mad at me. So punch me – let it out.”

Isa’s eyes narrowed. “No,” she shot back, her voice resolute and sharp.

“C’mon, Nott,” Regulus pressed. “Go for it – one good punch. Just ignore the sensitive pa—”

BAM!

Before he could finish his sentence, Isa had punched him well and hard right in his shoulder.

“Oi, *fuck*!” Regulus hissed immediately, rubbing the sore spot. “Davies taught you how to throw a punch, hasn’t he?”

Isa looked oddly smug, arms crossed, one eyebrow arched in satisfaction.

A few students in the common room snickered at the scene but quickly averted their gazes when both Regulus and Isa shot them a fierce glare. Regulus, no stranger to Isa’s temper, decided to cast a Muffliato just in case.

“Alright,” Regulus muttered, pocketing his wand before turning back to her. “And now tell me I’m a hypocrite.”

Isa blinked. “What’s up with you, Reg?”

“It’s what you think, isn’t it?” Regulus’s tone was resigned but firm. “What you’ve been thinking ever since you found out about me and him. So go on, tell me – tell me what you think.”

Isa hesitated, then exhaled sharply.

“Yes, you know what, Reg? You’re absolutely right — you’re a bloody hypocrite, Black,” she snapped, her voice sharp, the realisation dawning as she spoke. “You remember your own words? *‘You don’t just fall in love.’ ‘It doesn’t just happen.’*” Her voice rose with each phrase. “Well — what about you, Reg? Didn’t that apply to you too? Why did you let it happen, then? Why didn’t you stop it?”

Her voice kept rising, and Regulus was growing slightly concerned about the Pandora's box he had just opened.

"Why the fuck did you get yourself into this position? Fuck, Reg — I'm just—" Her voice faltered as she threw up her hands in frustration. "Shit, I've been so worried — I *am* still worried. FUCK—"

"Davies taught you that foul mouth too, Nott?" Regulus quipped, unable to keep the smirk off his face.

Oh, if only Isa's mother could see her now.

"Oh, fuck off, Reg," she bit.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other — Isa's eyes still blazing with anger and concern, Regulus doing a poor job of hiding his amusement.

And then, suddenly, they both burst into laughter, the heavy atmosphere broken.

Isa sighed, dropping back onto the sofa.

Regulus followed suit, letting his head fall onto her shoulder. Isa's hair tickled his face as she shook slightly with laughter. Eventually, though, the sound faded, replaced by the quiet rustling of her robes as she traced small circles on his arm.

"You're right, you know," Regulus murmured. "I let it happen. I should've stopped it. There were so many moments when I could've ended it. But I didn't."

Isa pulled back slightly to look at him, then sighed, leaning her head against the back of the sofa.

"I know, Reg," she said softly. "But it's just too beautiful, isn't it? When it happens."

Chapter End Notes

> Alright, not much happening in this chapter (but important for scenery/context etc.), but I promise you enough will happen soon ;)
>
> Oh and the book they discuss on the train is, of course, The Just Assassins by Albert Camus (or Les Justes in French).

Chapter 23: Of Killing & Lockerrooms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The end of the year neared quickly, with the time still filled with endless O.W.L. revision, Quidditch practice and Daily Prophet reports detailing violent clashes – sometimes even casualties – as tensions outside the castle escalated.

Regulus felt a continuous unrest – he'd fall asleep at night thinking about all the wand motions he'd mastered for his practicals, all the endless dates he had to remember for his History exam and all the locations mentioned in the Daily Prophet, potentially giving away interesting events.

Little did he know, though, that this unrest would accumulate into something so much graver, so much bigger than that.

Yes, the worst was yet to come.

It was the last Hogsmeade visit of the year, and the last weekend before the exams. Regulus had been invited by Cissy to meet at the Three Broomsticks. Now, Regulus couldn't recall a meet-up with Cissy in Hogsmeade which hadn't left him completely dreading his existence, so he had already braced himself – no good, no peace could come from meeting up with his cousin at the village, and he'd better be mentally prepared for it.

He knew it couldn't possibly be worse than her breaking the news that he'd have to walk her down the aisle for the entire wizarding world to see, or to have his mind probed by her sister possibly resulting in his premature death – but still, something warned him, some sixth sense maybe, that it could still, always, *always* be worse.

And boy, was he right about that.

Lost in the correct dates for the various Giant Wars, he approached the Three Broomsticks – only to pause in surprise. Cissy was waiting outside. Sure, the weather was pleasant – warm and sunny – but it was very uncharacteristic for her to linger outside; it was much more dignified to be seated inside.

Regulus sensed that she caught his hesitation as she smiled

reassuringly and pulled him into a brief embrace. As always, she smelled of freshly pressed clothes and subtle florals.

“Come,” she almost whispered, voice gentle in a way that set him on edge. “Let’s go.”

Regulus frowned but complied – falling into step beside her as she steered him through the winding streets of Hogsmeade. When they passed the last row of shops and continued toward the village’s Apparition point, a feeling of deep unease mastered him.

Well, at least it was now clear why she hadn’t waited for him inside.

“We — we’re leaving?” he asked, voice sharper than intended.

Cissy nodded, her grip firm but not forceful. “Yes. We have some things to discuss that I’d rather handle in private.”

Instantly, a pit formed in his stomach – what was this about? What could possibly be so grave that they had to convene privately?

Sure, now that the Revolution was entering a new phase, it made sense to take security more seriously – but they could’ve handled it with a simple Muffliato in the pub.

This had to be truly serious.

He was trying to make sense of his thoughts and press her for answers, but before he could muster any coherent question or thought, he felt the familiar pull of Apparition, and the next thing he knew, they were standing before the grand wrought-iron gates of Cissy’s home.

Cissy’s demeanour remained disconcertingly pleasant and cheerful as they stepped through the gates. She turned to him, her voice light. “Have you eaten?”

Regulus blinked, the question so out of place it took him a moment to register it.

“No… just breakfast.” Even as he said it, he realised he wasn’t hungry in the slightest — his throat was dry, his pulse unsteady. Frankly, the last thing on his mind was food right now.

“Let’s have lunch in the garden, then,” Cissy said. “Make it a picnic.”

Not much later, they lay on a soft blanket spread over the manicured grass. The scene was cosy and peaceful – sunlight dappling through

the trees, a strickle of a fountain filling the silence and birds flitting through the hedges. The scene was idyllic – a stark, almost mocking contrast with the conversation that was about to unfold.

Cissy was stalling – Regulus could see it in the way she toyed with her fork, the way her gaze flickered away and how she seemed to be engrossed by the strawberries in her bowl. Regulus felt a strange mixture of annoyance and pity as he saw Cissy struggling.

Regulus sighed and decided to put her out of her misery.

“Come off it, Cissy.”

She looked up at him.

“What?” she asked, all innocence.

Regulus shot her a pointed look, rolling his eyes in irritation to mask the growing unease twisting in his gut. “What do you want to discuss? Why are we here instead of the Three Broomsticks? What could possibly be so horrendous that we can’t meet in public?”

Cissy exhaled, gaze dropping briefly before meeting his squarely. “It’s about the… inauguration.”

Regulus raised a brow; so this was Revolution-related.

“What about it?”

Cissy hesitated, then continued. “Alright, so — you know everyone’s been looking for a way to communicate more efficiently.”

Regulus nodded, sitting up. Although he hadn’t been very sharp at least during the last meeting, he knew it had come up. He vaguely remembered Yaxley mentioning some magical modes of communication which had made Regulus think of the two-way mirror his brother and Potter used.

Cissy continued before Regulus could say anything. “We’ve achieved so much already; we’ve secured many important supply lines, importers… but we still lack an effective communication system between all of us. We’re so scattered; some people are abroad, some at the Ministry, some elsewhere in Britain, you’re at Hogwarts…”

Regulus nodded, completely blank as to where this conversation was going. “Yes. We’ve discussed it in the last two meetings. What does

that have to do with this …inauguration?"

Cissy's expression remained measured. "They've found a way."

Regulus frowned. "A way to communicate?"

She nodded. "It's … a little bit like a tattoo. They've chosen the Dark Mark; you know, for symbolic reasons. It's a communication system that allows instant summoning… and direct connection to the Dark Lord. It is… marked on your arm. He can call upon anyone wearing it at will, and they can reach out in return. It's very effective, quick — brilliant, really."

Regulus absorbed this, rolling the thought over in his mind – so they'd all have some … tattoo connecting them to the Dark Lord… He didn't let himself dwell on his feelings about being connected to a person through his body – which was honestly really unsettling – because he felt that they had not even reached the heart of the matter.

"Alright," he said slowly. "So we'll have a communication system, then."

"Yes." Cissy's lips pressed together. "But it comes at a price."

Ah. There it was.

A flicker of unease curled in his stomach. There was something about her eyes, about her lips that made him eerily anxious.

"What do you mean?"

Cissy exhaled through her nose. "It is a binding sigil. A magical brand that fuses a soul piece into the mark itself."

Regulus frowned. "A soul piece?"

She nodded. "Yes. The mark is burned into the flesh and bound to… the Dark Lord."

Regulus, unfamiliar with this kind of magic, was intrigued. "So you gain this connection through the Mark… through your soul?"

"Yes." Cissy met his gaze evenly. "There's a fractured soul piece fused into the Mark itself."

Regulus considered this and arched an eyebrow. He didn't have a lot of experience with magic concerning the soul – barring Occlumency

and its connection to the soul, of course.

“Alright. But then… how would you fracture a piece of your soul?”

The following silence stretched a bit too long.

Until Cissy broke it.

“You kill someone.”

Silence.

Regulus blinked.

And then, against his will, burst out in laughter – hard and uncontrolled.

Bloody hell. This was the most bizarre thing ever — being lured to Cissy’s house from Hogsmeade, talking about some inauguration, and then having Cissy pull a prank on him like this.

Slowly, though, the realisation dawned.

She wasn’t laughing.

Instead, she looked somewhere between uncomfortable and annoyed.

“*What*?” Regulus whispered.

Cissy sighed. “I’m not joking, Reg.”

He stared at her, incredulous.

She was serious. This wasn’t a joke. She was actually serious about this.

“You want me to *kill* someone?”

Cissy’s voice remained steady. “Look, we’ve explored every possibility. For months, we’ve been searching for a way – a way to outsmart them, something giving us an edge. They’re ahead of us in so many ways; they have the Ministry, they have power over St. Mungo’s and Gringotts… This communication system would really change that balance – we need an advantage. But yes, it comes at a price… There is no other way – we’ve looked for other ways, but there simply isn’t one.”

Regulus exhaled sharply. “So we all… have to kill someone?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head, still not completely sure whether this was a joke or not. “So this is the inauguration we’ve been discussing all this time? We just — snatch someone off the street, kill them, and that’s it?”

Cissy’s lips twitched into a wry, almost compassionate smile. “We’ve decided not to make it… meaningless.”

Regulus raised a brow. “And what does that mean?”

“Everyone has to choose someone. It won’t be a stranger. It has to be a… worthwhile act.”

Regulus scoffed at the absurdity of the conversation. “A worthwhile killing?”

Cissy tilted her head. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

Regulus snorted. “You mean — do I have someone I’d like to murder?”

This was perhaps the most absurd conversation he’d ever had – and with Sirius as a brother, Mother as a mother, Barty and Evan as best friends and Bellatrix as a cousin, there were, in all honesty, *plenty* of bizarre conversations to pick from.

Did he have someone in mind he wanted to kill?

Was there someone he’d like to murder?

He thought about it for a moment.

No, not really.

Well, except, perhaps one person. But that person was participating in the inauguration herself. And it probably wouldn’t go over well with Cissy if he admitted that the only person he wouldn’t mind killing one day was, in fact, her sister.

She took his silence as a no.

“I thought so,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve been thinking… Isa’s father mentioned someone.”

Regulus frowned. “What?”

So this was already decided. It was already a done deal.

It shouldn’t surprise him – it wasn't as if he ever had a real say in these things; he was just expected to execute whatever had already been decided. But still, the idea that Isa’s father had been discussing who Regulus could kill for some inauguration was too bizarre to fathom.

What the actual fuck.

“He knows of a man. Imprisoned in Turkey,” Cissy continued.

Ah yes – *of course* Magnus Alaric Nott could get his hands on some dude in a random prison in Turkey.

He didn’t share this thought and blinked. “Why would I want to kill some random imprisoned man in Turkey?”

Cissy’s voice was quiet.

“Because he’s a child molester.”

The effect was raw and instant.

It felt like he’d been slapped in the face. Like she had dumped a bucket of ice water over him. Like she’d punched him squarely in the gut.

He stared at her.

“If you heard what he’s done,” she continued, “you’d see. It would be a service to the world, Reg.”

Regulus had a hard time making sense of the emotions that surged through him – shock… Complete, numbing shock of what was asked of him, of what he was expected to do. Irritation – annoyance that there wasn’t a better way to solve this communication problem, just so he wouldn’t have to do it. Because honestly, he didn’t find the idea appealing at all. He had never seriously considered killing someone. Yes – he had read about it, philosophised about it, but had always thought that *if* that day came, it would be a heat-of-the-moment, kill-or-die situation, not… part of some inauguration, or for some communication system. No, he didn’t find the idea of deliberate, calculated murder appealing at all.

Still - the man *was* a child molester.

He'd done all the things that had been done to him.

Had been the torture, the hell of so many children. The reason why they couldn't sleep at night, all alone. The reason why they couldn't sleep at night *with* someone. The person without whom they'd feel lost, incomplete, but whose presence left them shattered, fragmented, too. The reason for so many tears, for so many shrieks, for the bite marks in the middle of the night when the demons wouldn't shut up.

He should *want* to kill him, shouldn't he?

It would be a service to the world. Surely no child molester deserved to breathe, deserved to take up space in this world?

And yet… it felt… like betrayal, too.

He couldn't place it, couldn't pinpoint it, had no idea where it came from, but the idea that they had picked a child molester for him specifically – it left a very bitter taste in his mouth.

He quickly shoved the emotions down, afraid that they would paralyse him if he let them fester. It was too much – too much to fathom, to make sense of.

Finally, he exhaled, shifting the conversation toward practical matters.

"So… when is the inauguration?"

Cissy's answer was quiet. "Second week of the summer holidays."

Regulus let out a dry laugh. What a way to start the holidays.

So they were waiting for him – waiting for term to end so he could join them. All the distinguished revolutionaries, all the important figures, waiting for the schoolboy's holidays to begin so he could be part of the inauguration.

Odd, how he could feel dread and pride all at once.

*****

Regulus had returned to the castle in a strange, muted state — he didn't feel much, save for a flattened form of resolution; he would have to do it, would have to accept it and that was that. He had long

ago chosen his path. Had long ago chosen the path of Revolution. And this — this was the sacrifice he had to make, the price he had to pay.

There was no other way. They needed the Mark, needed an advantage over the Modernists. And this — this was the way. And it wouldn't be cold-blooded, wouldn't be meaningless, worthless. He would take down someone who deserved it. He would do it on their behalf — on behalf of all the children that man had made suffer beyond comprehension, beyond repair.

How did one do it, though?

How did one kill another person?

He knew the Killing Curse – had seen it cast on several occasions, even, although it had always concerned animals, never humans. He knew the words he would have to say.

Avada Kedrava.

He could, very faintly, remember the wand motion. But even then, he had been young. Surely, he couldn't trust his younger self's memory?

Who did he turn to?

Who could he ask – who could show him, explain to him, how to use the spell?

Who could tell him what motion, what stance, what flick of a wand could take a human soul away? What movement marked the difference between present and past? Between breathing and stillness? Between life and death?

Isa noticed. She always did. She saw that he was struggling with something, that something beyond O.W.L.s and Quidditch had taken root in his mind, consuming him. That it made him wonder, made him contemplate, made him marvel — marvel at the simplicity of it all.

Just two words. A flick of the wrist. And a life was gone.

Still, there were two small consolations.

First, with his mind so occupied, he found it surprisingly easy to suppress his feelings for Potter. They still saw each other at the pitch, but only interacted when absolutely necessary, and for once, Regulus felt relieved by it. There was no grief, no sting, no uneasy twist in his

gut. No — Potter had chosen his path, and Regulus had chosen his. They were incompatible. And that was all there was to it.

Incompatible.

Another consolation was that he actually enjoyed studying for and taking his O.W.L.s; focusing on his courses and exams provided a welcome distraction from the daunting task that lay ahead, and well – with all his friends complaining about the stress and pressure, Regulus felt oddly grateful to not feel any of that, but to feel relief as he focused on his textbooks and the elaborate rolls of parchment filled with ink by Isa that, despite their absurd length, were actually supposed to be summaries.

“Alright, so for Arsura,” Evan said, theatrically flicking his wand, “I do this – and for Leviplica, I just flick it like–” he made some very disturbing movements with his wand “–this, right?”

To no one’s surprise, nothing happened. Or rather – something happened, but entirely the wrong thing. Arsura, a minor heat charm, was supposed to curl the edges of a piece of parchment, but Evan had miraculously managed to set the entire roll on fire. And the Leviplica – the publication charm – made the quill in front of him splitting into half rather than adding a similar one.

Regulus and Barty, who were settled like an audience on the couches in their regular corner of the common room, burst out laughing.

“Charms is going to off you, Rosier,” Barty barked, practically doubling over.

“All those jinxes you’ve mastered,” Regulus quipped in, “and *this* is where it gets hard?”

“Oh, *fuck you*,” Evan bit, dropping his arms in exasperation. “I did exactly what I was supposed to do!”

Isa, part of the audience too, but from another sofa, had been watching with growing pity and stepped in beside him.

“Alright,” she said resolutely, taking his hand and guiding his wrists through the proper motion. “For Arsura, it’s a slow, circular movement – don’t stab at it.” Evan nodded, letting Isa guide him. “And for Leviplica, the flick has to be sharp at the end – you want the duplication to be stable.”

Evan copied the movements on his own now, executing them flawlessly. The parchment curled at the edges as though it had been lightly scorched, and the quill split into two identical, solid copies.

His face split into a triumphant grin.

“Look, it worked!”

Barty let out a howl of laughter. “You’ve done the impossible, Nott – not a thing you can’t pull off, is there?”

Isa looked smug, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks as she dropped back into the sofa.

“And for that, Crouch, you have permission to borrow all my notes.”

Barty smirked. “Thanks, Nott.” Then, he turned to Regulus with that mischievous glint in his eye. “See? All according to plan.”

Regulus let out a bark of incredulous laughter. “You sly *nutter*. Complimenting notes out of her.”

Barty shrugged, laughing. “Well – I’m a Slytherin for a reason, aren’t I?”

Regulus shook his head with a reluctant smile. “Clever, Crouch.” Then, he straightened, stretching his arms and picked up his Quidditch gear collected on a pile next to the sofa. “Well, good luck instructing these two, Nott – I’m off to practice.”

Practice went well – sometimes Regulus wondered how the team would play if he had been on good terms with the Chaser and the Beater; right now, despite all the strained relationships, they were ruthless, relentless, completely brutal. What would change if they actually got along with each other? Sure, Beauxbatons was good – Maxim was an excellent flyer and probably a good Captain too, but it’d be hard to beat the Hogwarts team. If they kept this up, they could actually win the final match and claim the Cup.

After practice, Regulus moved through the locker room absentmindedly, gathering the last of his belongings. He was often the last to leave – the Macmillan sisters changed in another room, and the rest just seemed to always be in a hurry. And especially now that Potter seemed to go out of his way to avoid him at all costs, Regulus found himself alone in the room often.

He sat on the bench, pulling on his shoes, lost in thought, when suddenly — he felt a presence.

His fingers stilled against the laces.

Slowly, Regulus looked up.

Sirius stood near the entrance, hovering uncertainly.

And, even more uncharacteristic – he was alone.

No Potter attached to his hip.

Regulus took a last awkward glance around and concluded that they were truly alone, and that Sirius was trying to find a way to open a conversation.

Regulus raised an eyebrow, straightening on the bench. “Sirius.”

Sirius inclined his head slightly, his eyes – so identical to Regulus’s – void of emotion. “Regulus.”

Silence stretched between them, thick and uncomfortable. Regulus exhaled, giving Sirius another second or two to do whatever the hell it was he was doing, and then decided it was enough. He had truly no interest in dragging this uncomfortable moment out at all.

He slung his bag over his shoulder, ready to leave, when Sirius finally spoke.

"How are you?"

Regulus froze mid-step, blinking. He turned to face Sirius fully, brow furrowing. “What?”

Sirius didn’t waver. “How are you?”

Regulus, who wanted this conversation over with as soon as possible, merely shrugged. “I’m alright.”

He adjusted the strap of his bag and moved toward the exit. But before he could make it past Sirius, the next words stopped him cold in his tracks.

"How are they?"

The question was barely more than a whisper, one of the reasons

Regulus wasn't quite sure he had heard correctly – the other one being the nature of the question in the first place.

Regulus turned his head slightly, eyeing his brother with open confusion. "Who?"

Sirius cleared his throat, his posture suddenly stiff, as though bracing himself. "Mother and Father."

Seriously, this exchange only got weirder. For a moment, Regulus just stared.

Never – not once in all these months, in the year and a half that had passed since he'd left home, had he asked about their parents. Regulus quickly dropped his confused gaze and replaced it with a sceptical one.

"Well," he said slowly, unable to keep the shock completely out of his voice, "took you long enough to ask."

Sirius let out a sharp, humourless snort. "Has anyone ever asked about me?"

In all fairness — Uncle Alphard and Cissy had asked.

Uncle Alphard had always had a soft spot for Sirius, and it had been clear that he missed having his nephew around. They had understood each other in a strange way, after all. Both had been excellent riders, both had a taste for scandal and mischief. No, where Regulus had always been way too boring for his Uncle, Sirius had never disappointed in making his Uncle laugh and matching his energy or rebellious streak. And Regulus knew that Cissy, too, had always been fond of him; a bit like siblings could dislike each other yet feel some kind of connection based on shared blood and a shared childhood. Regulus knew that she'd been genuinely upset when Sirius left, although she'd done everything in her power to hide it.

But Father and Mother?

No. They hadn't asked.

Father never did – he probably genuinely didn't care. He'd provided his spouse with all things necessary to bear and raise their offspring and that was that – his job was done.

Mother had also never asked. Had never spoken his name, never

acknowledged the existence of her eldest son.

But it wasn't out of hate – no, on the contrary, Regulus knew she had loved, and still loved him very much. All the fury, the feigned indifference, the coldness; it was all testament to how much she loved him.

The fact that his departure had derailed her so that doctors from St. Mungo's had to tend to her and she had been bedridden for days – it all pointed to love. The Love for her eldest son, her favourite son – The son she tried to hate with every fiber of her being because he had betrayed her. Had driven a knife into her heart and twisted it for good measure.

Sirius didn't understand, though – for he wanted to be loved with words. And Mother didn't love with words. Mother loved with actions.

How she subjected him to the hairdresser's wand on a weekly basis, just so her eldest son's hair would frame his face perfectly. Sirius had hated it, but Regulus saw it for what it was — a gesture of love. The hairdresser could do half as good a job on Regulus – or forget about him entirely, which had happened more than once – and Mother wouldn't bat an eye.

How she berated Kreacher for making the wrong eggs at breakfast when they were little – sure, Mother had screamed at Sirius because he wouldn't stop crying about them being poached instead of boiled; but not out of frustration with *him*, only out of frustration because she wanted him to be satisfied. Because his happiness mattered. Regulus could have asked for something else and she probably wouldn't have even heard him.

The examples were plenty, and yet, yet Sirius refused to see – refused to see that all the ice, the cold and the detachment was indeed a testament to her love for him.

And Regulus knew it – knew how Mother couldn't stand being in the room with her youngest son when not absolutely necessary, because it only reminded her of Sirius. And Regulus knew that she didn't accompany him to King's Cross because she feared running into Sirius, and mostly, she feared the reaction it could draw from her. The pain it would cause and the salt it would pour in the wound that had, as a matter of fact, never closed. And he knew too that that was why she didn't come to the Quidditch matches at Hogwarts; she'd not only risk

bumping into the only person in the world that possibly could and indeed had broken her heart; she'd be forced to watch him in the sky for an entire match. Regulus knew that if it had been him leaving the family, she would've come, she would've watched; she could have ignored Regulus in the sky just for the sake of marveling at Sirius.

Eventually, it was Sirius who pulled him back to the present.

"Would you join them?" he asked.

Regulus looked at his brother, confused. "Join who?"

"You know who," Sirius shot.

Oh – he was talking about the Revolutionaries.

Regulus had a hard time suppressing the urge to laugh.

Would he join them?

Oh, if his brother even knew – knew that he sat with the Dark Lord on a regular basis, that he was by far the youngest among a group of so many powerful, distinguished Revolutionaries. If he knew that, in a matter of weeks, he'd become a murderer. That he'd kill for the cause.

Sirius truly had no idea.

Regulus tilted his head. "Would *you* join *them*?"

"Join who?"

"You know who."

Sirius let out a hollow laugh. "That side doesn't kill people."

Regulus rolled his eyes. This was Potter's naïve, self-righteous nonsense all over again.

"In a war, both sides kill," Regulus said evenly. "If you're standing in front of someone who's about to kill you, you kill them first. That's how war works. It's either killing or dying. You're no saint, Sirius. You're not better than anyone else. If you were in a fight, wand ready, you'd kill without thinking twice."

Sirius's jaw clenched. "We'd kill other people, kill for different reasons."

A tense silence fell over them. Sirius sat on the bench, his expression somewhere between exasperation and quiet determination. Regulus leaned against the wall, arms crossed, feigning indifference.

Then, after a pause, Regulus shrugged. “I can think of at least one person we’d both happily get rid of.”

Sirius’s brow furrowed for a split second before realisation hit.

“Bellatrix.”

Their gazes locked.

And just like that, they burst out laughing – hard and unrestrained.

For a brief moment, it felt like old times.

But eventually, the laughter faded, giving way to a familiar, weary silence.

Regulus sighed, pushing off the wall. “Well. See you.”

Sirius watched him go, something unreadable flickering in his expression. “Yeah,” he murmured. “See you.”

*****

The last match, at least theoretically, had been phenomenal. They were brutal, relentless and had utterly demolished Beauxbatons. Potter and the Macmillan sisters flew like a professional trio, Sirius and Warlow seemed to communicate telepathically and Hedge had been in his best form too — he had allowed only three Quaffles past him. Not that it mattered much — with Potter and the Macmillans scoring over twenty goals in just an hour, the state of affairs had been clear from the start. And then, the victory was officially sealed when Regulus had caught the Snitch in a rather thrilling dive.

The stands were more packed than ever; everyone wanted to witness the final match of the international tournament between the three schools. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students and teachers, Ministry officials, international and national reporters — everyone was there. Of course, Cissy and Lucius were present too, laughing and cheering in the Ministry stand with Yaxley beside them. With him stood Professor Thorne and, to Regulus’s utter surprise, Isa’s father. Sure, the man had a hand in nearly every venture, and many of his business associates worked at the Ministry, but it still struck Regulus as odd that he had

come to watch a Quidditch match in which his own daughter wasn't playing. Just before the match started — after they had endured that dreadful theatrical introduction before being allowed to shoot into the air — he had spotted Mr. and Mrs. Potter in the stands as well. A strange sense of relief had washed over him at the sight of Mrs. Potter — thinner, a little worn, but not bedridden, and with a twinkle in her eyes.

And yet, despite the cheers, the buzz, the flickering banners and the shouting mascots, Regulus felt oddly detached from it all. The world itself seemed unreal in general, with only fleeting moments of clarity breaking through — the brief joy of catching the Snitch, for example, though it lasted only seconds. Or the rush of satisfaction after finishing his last O.W.L. exam, knowing he had nailed it — but that, too, faded quickly.

The explosion of joy following his capture of the Snitch was subdued compared to the previous match; this was to be expected, of course, with the strange status quo with Potter and Sirius. Potter had nodded at him, smiling brightly as he'd led Hogwarts into victory, but without a hug. Sirius too had laughed, but the jubilant embrace was absent – and Regulus was happy to realise that it didn't bother him.

Besides – he had not been left to celebrate alone. Élise and Solène had been the first to reach him, practically tackling him in congratulatory hugs and kisses while Lucien and Maxim, despite their obvious disappointment, clapped him on the shoulder and offered begrudgingly impressed words. His Hogwarts friends followed – Barty and Evan lifting him cheerfully and Mulciber, Avery and Snape clapping in hilarity at Regulus's discomfort. Cissy, Lucius and Yaxley followed and quickly mingled with the rest of the crowd – everyone was delighted that Hogwarts had won and that the holidays were only a couple of days away.

At some point, Regulus noticed that Mr. Nott had left the stands and made his way towards him with Isa at his side, looking slightly flustered as her father carried himself with an effortless, powerful charisma. As he strode forward, the effect was immediate; older students – especially women – turned to watch him as he walked past, following him with their eyes, clearly drawn to the charm he exuded. Regulus could hardly blame them – the man was easily nearing his fifties, but undeniably handsome, with the silver threading through his stubble only making him more distinguished, and the mischief twinkling in his eyes adding to his appeal.

To Regulus's surprise, Mr. Nott didn't walk up to him immediately, but instead veered towards –

Sirius and Potter.

Potter's discomfort was palpable – not surprising, as Regulus had told him a story or two about Magnus Alaric Nott. Sirius, who had known him his entire life, stiffened, looking as though he was bracing himself for something.

But then—

"Brilliant flying, Potter. Truly impressive."

Potter blinked, visibly startled as Isa's father complimented him. His mouth opened, closed, then — "T-thank you, Sir."

Mr. Nott turned to Sirius, offering a small nod and a knowing smile. "Sirius."

Sirius paused for a moment, then inclined his head in return, silent but acknowledging.

With that, Mr. Nott continued forward, Isa trailing slightly behind. As he approached, the people surrounding Regulus instinctively stepped aside.

Regulus tried to ignore the awkwardness as he felt all eyes burning on them – his friends, eager to watch an exchange between him and Isa's father, but also Potter and Sirius.

Mr. Nott threw an arm around his shoulder and laughed at him, warm and familiar. "Well done, Regulus."

Regulus smiled, be it a bit stiffly. "What an honour having you in the stands, Mr. Nott."

Mr. Nott laughed harder, his charisma undeniable. "I wouldn't have missed it, not for this. And, of course, it was nice to see Dora at school."

Isa blushed slightly, visibly uncomfortable.

Regulus smiled kindly. "Well — you'll be at the banquet, won't you? I just need to grab my things."

"Ah, no, I must leave," Mr. Nott replied with an easy smile. Then, with

a knowing look, he added, “But we’ll see each other over the holidays, won’t we?”

Regulus nodded and quickly shoved down the knowledge that their next meeting would take place under rather macabre circumstances. He turned to his friends, letting them know he’d meet them at the castle, so he could retrieve his belongings from the locker room without an audience.

Once inside, he grabbed his bag and changed his shoes when he heard the door close behind him. Startled by the abrupt sound, Regulus snapped his head around.

Potter stood there, nodding in some uncomfortable form of greeting before beginning to collect his things. Regulus said nothing, focusing on tying his laces and ignoring the strange silence that hung in the air.

“So,” Potter finally broke it. “That was Nott’s father.”

Regulus’s hands froze on his laces for a split second before he glanced at Potter. Then, realising the statement hardly invited a response, he resumed tying them without a word.

“He looks… nice,” Potter continued, his voice betraying his confusion.

Regulus snorted.

“He doesn’t look… dangerous,” Potter clarified.

“Oh, don’t let the charisma and good looks fool you, Potter,” Regulus said dryly. “He’s all poise and charm — until he isn’t.”

Regulus had never personally witnessed that side of Mr. Nott, but he had heard enough to picture it vividly. He would much rather face the wrath of Mother, perhaps even Bellatrix – yes, they were relentless and vicious — but at least they were openly so. Mr. Nott, on the other hand, carried a certain calculatedness, a certain... something that sent a shiver down Regulus’s spine.

The sound of the door opening again yanked him from his thoughts.

Isa stepped in — and froze when she saw who was in the room alone, together.

“Oh,” she breathed, unable to hide her reaction.

Potter shot her an impressively cold glare, and Regulus could

practically see her mind racing with questions — why was he looking at her like that? Had she interrupted something important?

The situation sent Regulus into a level of discomfort he hadn't known was possible; he didn't know where to look, what to say, what to do — trapped in a room with the only two people who had seen him naked… like that, and one of them was clearly reliving that memory very sourly, while the other was trying to figure out whether the death glares she was receiving were because Potter knew they had both seen him naked… like that.

And, of course, Potter didn't know that Isa knew about him and Regulus and — *oh*, the sensation was actually painful.

No one spoke. The silence stretched unbearably long before Potter finally stood from the bench, his movements slow, almost theatrical. He nodded coldly at Regulus, then walked out without a word.

The door slammed shut behind him, and the silence that followed was suffocating.

"Sorry," Isa breathed. "I – did I – interrupt something?"

Regulus shook his head. "No."

"He — he knows about us, doesn't he?" she asked, realisation dawning.

Regulus sighed, then nodded reluctantly. "Yeah. He figured it out."

Isa nodded, letting the silence linger a little too long for Regulus's liking before shifting awkwardly on her feet.

"Okay, so," she finally spoke, breaking the thick tension in the air. "It's just — we're leaving tomorrow, and with the feast tonight, I thought it'd be hard to catch you alone without everyone thinking we're doing it in your dorm…"

Regulus snorted, grateful for her attempt to lighten the mood.

"They might think we're doing it here," he countered matter-of-factly, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

God, how many times had he ended up in some compromising position with Potter in this very room…

He quickly shook off the memories.

“Why did you want to catch me alone, though?”

Isa sighed, looking at the floor before catching his gaze, which was growing more alarmed by the second.

“Look, Reg,” she exhaled. “I know you’re sworn to secrecy and all that. But I can tell — something’s bothering you, and I don’t think it’s about… him.” Her gaze flickered toward the door briefly before returning to him. “Something happened when you last met up with your cousin—”

“I am seriously forbidden to talk about anything related to… that, Ies,” Regulus cut in immediately.

“I know,” she said. “But — everyone has their support system, Reg. I don’t believe for a second that none of the others confide in their spouses or each other. And that’s normal, healthy, even – you can’t bear this burden all alone.”

Regulus frowned slightly, uncertain where this was going.

“Just know, Reg, that you can talk to me,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She stepped closer, taking his hand in hers, the gesture reminding him oddly of that moment when she’d snuck out of his dorm. “I — I wouldn’t tell a soul, you know that. And it might help you.”

Regulus looked at her.

She was so sharp — it was almost unnerving how little got past her. Not that it surprised him; she had always been like this. Sensing situations, reading shifts in dynamics. So of course she had noticed – noticed how his mind drifted off more and more, counting down the days until that meeting – noticed how he sat there, wondering how he’d do it, if he *could* do it even, because the spell required conviction — required him to really, truly want to kill.

And of course she had linked it to his meeting with Cissy, for that was when it had started — the worrying, the momentary disassociations, the quiet, the wonder.

But how could he tell her? Tell her that he’d need to kill someone, that he’d need to sacrifice someone for the cause? How could he explain to her that the nature of the man he was supposed to kill did actually little to diminish his objections to it? Yes, the man was a child molester, didn’t deserve to live, had no right to take up any space or

room in this world — but why was Regulus burdened with killing him? Hadn't he suffered enough at the hands of a child molester already? Why did he have to suffer from one *again*?

And how did he explain that it wasn't just him, but also Isa's own father that would be part of the ritual? How did he explain that her father would be a murderer — was definitely one already? Surely, she was sharp and clever, so she'd have her suspicions, but hearing it like this from her best friend – that was something else.

How to tell her that, in a matter of days, both her father and her best friend would be murderers?

He sighed.

"I — I know, Ies," he said finally, dropping her hand and opening the door. "But I'm alright. There's nothing to tell. Truly."

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh... things are happening.

Chapter 24: Of Feasts & Names

Chapter Notes

> A longer chapter before the weekend. Let me know what you think!

The end-of-year feast reminded Regulus of last year's Ball in an unsettling way – so many things were still the same, yet also so much had happened over the course of a year, leaving the world, reality so different.

As tradition apparently dictated, they had all gathered in the dorm before the feast, dressed in their finest robes, symbolically finishing off Barty's last bottle of Firewhiskey.

Severus sat by the window, as always present but withdrawn, speaking only when directly addressed. Mulciber and Avery lounged on Crabbe's bed, devouring snacks at an utterly alarming rate while Barty sprawled across his own bed, lazily levitating a candy wrapper with his wand. Amaryllis and Melania had claimed the foot of Selwyn's bed, while Evan, naturally, occupied his own. Isa, after a brief hesitation, pulled a chair from the corner and settled between Regulus's and Barty's beds.

Regulus was glad – he'd caught the hesitation in Isa's eyes when she'd instinctively moved toward his bed, and he knew that she, like him, had suddenly remembered that the last time she'd been there she'd been entirely naked, with him tracing his fingers all over her body, his lips kissing all kinds of sensitive spots as he'd trailed down–

"So why aren't the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students celebrating with us?" Evan's voice snapped Regulus out of his thoughts. "It would make sense, right? The tournament's over and all."

"They planned to," Isa replied, her head tipped back against the chair, legs draped lazily over the armrest. "But security's tightened because of the war."

"You seem well-informed," Regulus remarked with a smirk. He was certain her knowledge had something to do with Head Boy Davies—the one she was supposedly not speaking to.

Isa shot him a flat look. "I listen."

“Shame, though,” Avery sighed. “Wouldn’t have minded partying with some French witches.”

Laughter rippled through the group, but Mulciber cut in with a smirk. “Yeah,” he drawled, swiping the Firewhiskey from Barty and taking a swig before passing it to Evan, “so, Black — did you go for the redhead or the brunette?”

“Oh, I hope the redhead,” Avery added. “I hear they’re… *feisty*.”

Barty and Mulciber sniggered, while Amaryllis and Melania exchanged glances, eyes darting between Isa and Regulus in discomfort. Isa merely raised an unimpressed brow.

“You lot really don’t have a subtle bone in your bodies, do you?” Regulus deadpanned.

It was bad enough they talked like this when it was just them — the blokes — sitting together, but to act like this with three girls around, all of whom had had some form of relationship with one of the blokes in the group, that was just shameless.

His friends, of course, laughed again, apparently completely unbothered by his objections.

Barty tipped his head back with a wicked grin. “No, no, I have intel that Black doesn’t go for redheads or brunettes. He’s more into blondes.”

Regulus rolled his eyes with a groan.

Isa, composed as ever, simply arched a brow. “Fascinating analysis, Crouch. Shall I expect an academic paper on the subject?”

Mulciber snorted, then turned to Isa. “Oi, Nott — why are you the only one sitting on a chair? There’s plenty of space on Black’s bed.”

“Oh, fuck off, mate,” Regulus groaned, but the room erupted into fresh laughter.

Isa sighed, dramatically clapping her hands together. “Alright, let’s get this over with, shall we? Yes — Regulus and I did it. Yes — we did it right here, in this specific bed. And yes — we had the absolute time of our lives. Now, will you all move on?”

Barty roared with laughter, high-fiving Isa in the process. “Oh, Nott,

there's no beating you, is there?"

Regulus, for his part, felt utterly uncomfortable discussing the topic of him sleeping with Isa and couldn't suppress the heat rising in his face, especially when the others howled around him at his visible discomfort.

"You lot are insufferable," he muttered.

Luckily, Isa quickly shifted the conversation. Taking the bottle of Firewhiskey from Barty, she took a gulp before levitating it toward Amaryllis. "So, Crouch, who's the unlucky lady tonight — Celine or Eira?"

Barty smirked broadly, leaning back on his bed. "If it all plays out really well, I might have them both come over."

The blokes all laughed, while the girls groaned. Isa wrinkled her nose. "That's disgusting, Crouch. Even for you."

"So — any plans for the holidays?" Melania asked, clearly eager to steer the conversation elsewhere.

"Syria, of course," Isa said with a groan.

"You joining?" Evan asked Regulus.

Regulus shrugged. "Mostly staying in London and Black Manor."

"Staying with my parents, partially in Bulgaria," Mulciber said.

Avery nodded. "Same. Family time."

Amaryllis sighed. "We were planning to go to Tuscany like last year, but my parents are against it — for security reasons, you know, with the war..."

"Yeah…" Melania said quietly. "I guess it won't be the same anytime soon, right?"

Isa exhaled, her gaze drifting. "Yeah. I'm curious how we'll sit here a year from now."

With that thought lingering between them, they all rose and made their way to the Great Hall.

The last evening at Hogwarts – the last feast where they could pretend

the world beyond these walls wasn't closing in. Tonight there would be laughter, dancing, banter and – above all – normalcy. But tomorrow, when stepping outside the castle, there would be no more pretending, no more sanctuary.

The war was no longer approaching.

It was here.

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The feast itself also reminded Regulus of last year in many ways. Sure, there were some differences; last year's Ball had been the grand conclusion of the Unity Project and had served to announce the Project's winners too. It was at the Ball that Dumbledore had announced Regulus's group was off to Beauxbatons for part of the following year. And how much it had changed — how much it had derailed but simultaneously flourished his life. Yes, he'd had crossed some boundaries before, had kissed Potter before, had already come to conclude he fancied him — but there, at Beauxbatons, he and him had become they, there had they fused so many parts of themselves, had they become entwined in so many ways, irrevocably and irreversibly.

Because there was no way back. Sure, he could give it up — had done so already, as they'd ended what was between them — but he could never truly let go. No matter where life would take him, whom he'd give his heart to in the end, whom he'd marry and choose to spend the rest of his life with, a part of him would always belong to Potter. With his kindness, his patience, his understanding and all his charm, Potter had taken a piece of him.

And despite the hurt, despite all he'd had to surrender, all he'd had to relent because of it — he'd do it again. Without hesitation, without a second thought, he would do it again. He would never have wanted to miss loving Potter, to have been loved by Potter – not for anything in the world.

Like last year, he did everything in his power to avoid looking toward the Gryffindor corner in the Great Hall, and – also much like last year – he failed miserably. There was something magnetic about him — dancing stupidly with the Gryffindor girls, who swooned over the Quidditch Captain, exchanging jovial laughter with some of the professors and looking maddeningly handsome in his goofy, effortless cheerfulness.

Sure, Regulus had distractions — he danced with Amaryllis, with

Melania, with Isa, if only to avoid Eira's friends and their very clear intentions. He laughed and joked with his own friends. And yet, despite all of that, a strange melancholy settled over him.

He wasn't sure whether is was due to the reminiscence of where he'd been a year earlier and where he was now — and where he'd possibly be next year, or the inescapable truth that the world was now really changing and going through that dark phase before it'd shine brighter than ever before, or whether it was due to the realisation that this year had marked both the true beginning and the inevitable end of him and Potter. Or the fact that this was his last night at Hogwarts without blood on his hands — if you didn't count his complicity in Legot's death; which he chose not to, just for the sake of keeping down his food.

Too many reasons. Too many thoughts and realisations.

When at some point he'd long ago transgressed his quota on dancing, had lost several of his friends and in general felt like he wanted to have the evening done with, he silently slipped away from the Great Hall. He wandered through the castle, down corridors and past tapestries aimlessly, and in some absentminded stroll, he ended up in the antechamber.

A small, stupid chamber — the only special thing about it was that he'd kissed Potter here, pressed against the wall, a year ago.

"Thinking about the good old days?"

Regulus jolted from his thoughts, snapping his head toward the entrance.

Of course. Potter stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, his arms crossed in contemplation.

Regulus let out a mirthless snort. "Something like that."

Potter smiled softly as he closed the dear behind him and leaned against it. "So — we're back at square one."

Regulus sighed and took this into consideration — they had started something last year here; their second kiss had been in this chamber. They could've brushed off their first kiss as a mistake – especially as it had involved alcohol. But that second kiss, desperate and explosive against the wall – and completely sober – no, that had been deliberate.

Still, it was hardly like they had gone back, returned to that moment.

“I don’t think we’re back,” Regulus said, his voice thoughtful. “I don’t think we can ever go back to what we were before. To who we were or thought we were before.”

Potter’s gaze was deep, contemplative.

“Do you think — do you think it would’ve worked if there hadn’t been a war?”

Regulus smiled softly. This question had crossed his mind on multiple occasions too. What made them not work? Was it politics? Society? Or was there more to it?

“I don’t know,” Regulus eventually admitted. “I — I don’t think so. This goes beyond you being a modernist and me being a traditionalist, doesn’t it?” A silence stretched between them. “Even if you’d been a hardcore traditionalist, it wouldn’t have been accepted. The Black heir with a man?”

Potter let out a small, hollow laugh. “Yeah, I guess you’re right…”

Another tense silence followed, both of them staring at each other, lost in thought, neither moving nor speaking. Until – of course – Potter did.

“How did we end up here, Reg?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Regulus sighed. “It’s simple, isn’t it? We were drawn to each other, fell for each other…” He looked up at Potter’s contemplative gaze, watching as he let the words sink in, trying to figure out where Regulus was going. Regulus had once told him, after all, that it hadn’t been real between them, and now he was finally confessing that that wasn’t true. “But you fell for someone who turned out to be different than you thought.”

Potter shook his head.

“No — that’s not true, Reg. There’s so much good in you. But there’s also…. And I wish — I wish I could only see the good in you.”

Regulus had a hard time suppressing the irritation and the hurt at this truth — the fact that Potter had to brush past things, to look beyond things to love him. Whereas Regulus loved him for everything, even

for the things that didn't align with him, the faults and errors. Yes, his world view was erroneous and naive, but it also made him optimistic, charming and enthusiastic.

The fact that the things that should make Regulus dislike Potter, perhaps despise him even, only made him love him more, while the same didn't hold true in return, was a very bitter pill to swallow.

Regulus was about to muster all the coherence he could find to steer the conversation in a sensible direction when he suddenly heard the distinct sound of familiar voices approaching.

Potter heard them too, realisation dawning instantly.

"Are those — Nott and Davies?" he asked.

Regulus nodded, feeling a spike of panic as the voices grew closer — so close that they could hardly be heading anywhere other than this antechamber.

"Shit," Regulus cursed. "They can't find us together here—"

Potter nodded in instant agreement and moved quickly, stepping slightly in front of Regulus but a little to the right. In one swift motion, he pulled his cloak from his pocket and tossed it over them.

Regulus, now well accustomed to Potter's quick reflexes when it came to his stupid cloak, had already anticipated this move before it even happened. He had drawn his wand and cast a quick Muffliato just in time — just as the door was yanked open.

Regulus knew Isa well enough to sense, without even looking at her, that she was highly emotional, and when Davies closed the door behind him and sighed deeply, Regulus realised they were about to witness Isa and Davies's final goodbye.

He flinched.

It would've been better to just get caught here with Potter — they could have claimed to be discussing Quidditch or simply running into each other. Anything, *anything* would be better than witnessing this moment between his best friend and the bloke she loved. But he could hardly back out now – Isa and Davies didn't know about the Invisibility Cloak, and even if they did, it would be beyond weird to find Regulus and Potter hiding under one, their bodies nearly touching.

Fuck.

Such a stupid move.

Potter's *stupid* fucking cloak.

Isa and Davies stood a few feet apart, gazing at each other. In the chamber's dim light, Regulus could easily make out the mixed anger and despair in her brown eyes while Davies looked at her in some form of resigned sadness.

Then, after a silence that stretched too long for Regulus's liking, Isa took Davies's hand, closed the gap between them and pressed her lips to his. Davies immediately cupped her face gently as he kissed her tenderly.

Oh. Regulus really, truly didn't want to be here.

He groaned and rubbed his temples.

How had he ended up in this situation?

The kissing quickly grew more emotional, more desperate. Isa's hands slid into Davies's hair, fingers tangling through the strands, pulling him closer while Davies pressed against her with his grip tightening around her waist. Their breaths grew uneven and their lips moved almost feverishly. Davies tilted his head, deepening the kiss, and Isa responded in kind, pressing up onto her toes as if she couldn't get close enough.

"Oh," Potter breathed. "*Oh* – this is uncomfortable."

"Tell me about it," Regulus groaned.

From the corner of his eye, he caught Potter's pained expression shifting into something slightly amused.

"Is my discomfort a joke to you, Potter?" Regulus hissed.

Potter shrugged, a faint, smug smile tugging at his lips. "No," he replied with emphasis. "But this might be the most entertaining thing I'll see all summer – and that's saying something, considering I'm going to the match between Puddlemere United and the Montrose Magpies." He smirked. Man, it must be hard — watching Isa and Davies make out—"

"Oh, toss off, Potter," Regulus snapped. "Me and Isa – that had

nothing to do with love."

This seemed to pique Potter's interest. He arched his eyebrows and studied Regulus curiously. "Then what was it?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, not in the slightest eager to discuss the workings behind his past with Isa while trapped under an invisibility cloak with the only person he actually wanted to see naked but couldn't, while watching Isa make out with the person she actually wanted to see naked but couldn't.

God, this had become way too complicated.

At any rate, Regulus could hardly explain to Potter that he'd slept with Isa as part of some improvised soul-layering project to hide Potter's existence in Regulus's life behind mental barriers to shield his mind from his cousin's probing.

No, that truth was way too bloody twisted for Potter to comprehend.

"It's complicated," Regulus finally said, flinching at the continued sounds of Isa and Davies kissing.

They'd stick to kissing — right?

Regulus shuddered at the thought of Isa and Davies doing Merlin knew what in this antechamber as part of their final goodbye.

Luckily, at some point, Davies withdrew from the embrace, creating distance between them while slowly and reluctantly shaking his head, as if to communicate that they couldn't be doing this.

Isa sighed, and the emotion seemed to actually radiate from her body.

"It's – it's just –" she started, her features dishevelled and her bottom lip trembling in emotion. And then, she broke down into tears, her hands falling limply to her sides. "It's – it's *so* unfair."

Davies closed the distance again, pulling her into a hug, his head resting on hers. His eyes flicked upward toward the ceiling, his jaw tightening as he tried to blink away his own tears.

Regulus sighed deeply as he saw Potter's uncomfortable eyes on him — clearly feeling, too, that they had become part of something far too private.

It wasn't like they had a choice – they hadn't barged into the room to

eavesdrop, but still, it felt wrong being here, witnessing something so deeply personal unfold between Isa and Davies.

“I know,” Davies whispered into her hair, rubbing soothing circles on her back.

“It makes no sense,” Isa breathed, her voice thick with emotion, her tears falling freely now. Her voice rose, raw and desperate. “It makes no sense — no — I can’t do it. We can’t give this up — I just need to make them understand—”

Davies shook his head, his voice hoarse, resolute and loving all at once. “No, we’re not going there again, Dora.”

Regulus felt a pang — sharp and raw — at him calling her Dora. Only her father called her Dora. Everyone else stuck to Isa, Ies or just Isadora.

Dora.

It was so intimate, so private.

Regulus’s throat turned dry. He *really* didn’t want to be there.

“You deserve it all, Dora,” Davies continued, his voice stronger now but thick with emotion. “You deserve to have it… properly. You deserve the wedding, the house, the ease of life. You deserve everything.” He sighed. “Fuck — you deserve everything, all the good things in the world. You deserve to do it properly, totally, completely. And with me – with me, you won’t be able to.”

Isa didn’t answer but instead sobbed into his chest, trembling.

Regulus’s throat turned even drier at the sight of his best friend reduced to tears — and, truth be told, at Davies being so bloody righteous. Sure, he disliked him, knew that he was way out of her league — but *shit*, he was actually a decent bloke, wasn’t he?

“God, I love you,” Davies murmured. “You know that. How I wish things could be different. How I wish I could grow old with you. Dance with you. Hear you sing. See you laugh every bloody day.”

Potter glanced at Regulus from the corner of his eye, clearly trying to gauge his reaction. Regulus refused to meet his gaze, fixing his eyes firmly on the wall instead.

“Man, the bloke has a way with words, doesn’t he?” Potter muttered.

Regulus let out a short, mirthless snort at Potter’s attempt to lighten the mood. His smile was tighter than he intended. “Yes, he certainly does.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Isa choked out.

“No, don’t do that, Dora,” Davies whispered. “I’m replaceable. You’ll find someone who can fill my shoes.”

Isa shook her head, her voice breaking with frustration. “No – it’s unfair. It just makes me *furious*–”

Davies exhaled slowly. “Don’t be. I’m glad, Dora – I’m truly grateful I had the honour of meeting you. I will always, *always* be grateful for what we had.”

Isa cried harder.

“Now don’t cry anymore,” Davies murmured. “You’re strong, you’re fierce. It just — it wasn’t for us. Not in this life. And now it’s time for you to go find what is.”

Isa pulled back, her tear-streaked face tilted up to his, shaking her head stubbornly.

Davies smiled sadly, stroking her tears away, cupping her face, and pressing a final, lingering kiss to her lips. “Go back to your friends, Dora. We’re only making it harder this way.”

Isa nodded, harshly wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. She took another shaky breath, nodded again, then turned on her heels and walked out of the chamber without another word.

Regulus was relieved that at least one of the two had left – surely, Davies would follow soon, liberating Regulus and Potter from the utter discomfort of that moment.

As the sound of Isa’s footsteps faded, Davies turned and, with a sharp breath, punched the wall.

“FUCK!” he roared, his voice raw with emotion.

Regulus flinched, startled by the outburst, while Potter jolted beside him. Davies’s face was twisted with grief, his shoulders rising and falling unevenly as a few stubborn tears slipped down his cheek.

Then, with a deep, unsteady breath, he wiped them away, straightened, and without another word, walked out of the room.

Despite the fact that now both had left, Regulus and Potter remained frozen under the cloak for some time, coming to terms with what they'd just witnessed.

At some point Potter decided it was enough and slowly pulled the cloak off them, raking a hand through his hair in visible discomfort.

"That – that was hard to watch," he muttered, clearing his throat in the process.

Regulus nodded, quickly meeting Potter's gaze and shooting him a small, unconvincing smile. "Yeah. I'll – I'll go check whether… I can find her somewhere."

Potter nodded quickly. "Yes, of course – well – see you around, I guess."

Regulus nodded, not looking at him as he turned on his heels and left the room too.

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Impressively, nothing in Isa's demeanour betrayed she'd had a rough, emotional night. Regulus hadn't seen her again at the feast and had concluded that she must have gone to bed early. He had done the same — an excellent decision, considering he'd been jolted awake in the middle of the night by the unmistakable giggling of Eira Warrington slipping into Barty's bed.

Thank Merlin they'd cast a Silencing Charm immediately, but the knowledge that Eira was there, just a few yards away, in all likeliness completely naked, had made Regulus shudder and had made it hard to sleep.

Luckily, Barty had been too hungover – and probably too miserable at the prospect of returning home – to provide the rest of the group with an animated, exaggerated retelling of what had happened behind the bed curtains. The compartment had been uncharacteristically quiet as they returned to King's Cross. Everyone seemed so engrossed by their own thoughts about the holidays, the looming war and the past year that no one so much as raised an eyebrow when Isa slipped into the compartment and curled up against Regulus without a word. Even without having witnessed her conversation with Davies, it was

obvious she was exhausted. Her normally sharp, fiery eyes were dull, void of their usual spark, and the way she rested her head against his chest spoke volumes of her feelings.

Regulus swallowed the lump in his throat and said nothing. Instead, he twirled the ends of her braids between his fingers, quietly and slowly, and closed his eyes too for the remainder of the journey.

Only when the train pulled into the station and everyone rose to gather their things did they finally separate.

“You off to Damascus immediately?” Regulus asked, his voice quiet in the near-empty compartment.

Isa shook her head. “No — we’re staying in London for the first two weeks. Then we’ll all head to Syria together, including my father.”

Regulus nodded. So they were waiting until the inauguration before traveling to their estate.

“I’ll be at Black Manor for the next two weeks,” he told her. “Come by whenever you want, alright?”

Isa nodded but blinked rapidly, clearly trying to chase away the moisture in her eyes.

Regulus, knowing she wouldn’t want to explain why she was getting emotional, nudged her lightly in an attempt to lighten the mood. “You getting sentimental, Nott? I would be too — if I were the only person you hadn’t closed the Floo Network off to.”

Isa tilted her head, confused but faintly amused. “What?”

Regulus smirked. “I’ve been advised to take security measures,” he said airily. “So I’ve shut off the Floo Network for everyone — except you.”

Isa’s lips parted slightly in surprise before she smiled, warm and genuine. “You’re the best, Reg,” she murmured, pulling him into a tight hug.

“I know, I know,” he sighed, squeezing her back. “So visit me, alright? You’re the only one who doesn’t need a formal invitation.”

Isa laughed, wiping at her eyes as she pulled away. “Definitely.”

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True to her word, Isa visited Regulus several times in the days prior to her departure to Damascus. Most of the time was spent on reading — Regulus had practically raided the bookstore in Manchester — and on lounging outside. The weather was exquisite; the summer heat thick in the air and the warmth clinging to the world even in the late evenings.

Two days into the holidays, they found themselves sitting in the shade of a sprawling oak tree near the pond. Regulus was absorbed in a new book by the German military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, while Isa lay sprawled across the grass, gazing up at the sky through half-lidded eyes.

“Bloody hell, it’s getting hot already,” she complained, shifting restlessly. “It’s like I’m in Damascus already.”

Regulus snorted, knowing full well that if she was struggling now, the Syrian heat would not be kind to her.

“You know what,” she announced suddenly, sitting up with a decisive motion. “I’m going for a swim.”

Regulus arched a brow but merely shrugged. “Go for it.”

Isa smirked, mischief sparking in her brown eyes as she, shamelessly, shimmied out of her long summer dress, leaving herself in nothing but her black lace underwear. She walked into the water with an air of normalcy and indifference suggesting she spent the majority of her time stripping down in front of him and walking around him in her lacy underwear.

Regulus couldn’t suppress the small smirk at the realisation that there were dozens of blokes from Hogwarts that’d kill to be where he was right now.

Not that he cared much — he’d found a way to cope with the memories of Isa arching into him and moaning his name — which basically entailed that he tricked his mind into thinking it had *not* been Isa, and somehow it worked and he could almost perfectly differentiate between his friend Isa and the Isa he’d gotten a glimpse of that night, as if they were two separate entities.

Sure, the initial moment of seeing her like this — black silk molding to her breasts, tracing her hips — it was hard, hard not to think about her that night, but then he managed to force it away with surprising ease, realising the girl now plashing in the pond was the girl he’d

befriended all that time ago, to whose charms he'd always been uniquely immune.

"The water's brilliant, Reg!" she called, stretching out her arms as she floated on her back.

Now, Regulus was hardly the swimmer, even more so because it involved taking off a considerable amount of clothes, but Isa's joy was infectious and it *was* getting hot, so at some point he'd decided to drop all decorum and just roll with it.

With a resigned sigh, he stood, stripping down to his boxers and his t-shirt. He lingered for a second, fingers at the hem, debating whether to remove the shirt, too.

Isa, of course, noticed his hesitation instantly.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," she groaned. "Just take it off, Reg. I have seen you naked, remember?"

Regulus shot her a withering glare, but begrudgingly peeled off his shirt.

"I thought we had a quiet understanding not to discuss that particular night," he said dryly before stepping into the water.

Isa only grinned. "Oh, I don't mind talking about it. It's you and your bloody privateness that's made that agreement," she quipped before flinging a handful of water into his face.

Regulus spluttered at the sudden coldness and retaliated immediately, sending a wave straight at her. She shrieked, diving beneath the surface to escape.

By the time she resurfaced, she was floating on her back again, lazily paddling away from him.

"Look at that," she teased. "Regulus Arcturus Black, swimming, voluntarily, in broad daylight. Someone pinch me."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Hilarious, Nott. I, as a matter of fact, have come to like swimming."

Isa snorted, now floating lazily on her stomach, tilted her head to glance at him sideways. "Does a particular person have something to do with that?"

“No,” Regulus shot back immediately.

“Liar,” she smirked. “I know you’ve been swimming together. I saw it in your memories.” She laughed victoriously.

Regulus groaned. “That’s vile, Nott — I thought we had an understanding too, to never discuss what you’ve seen inside my head.”

Isa grinned unapologetically, stretching out her arms as she floated. “Yeah, that agreement was mutual. Apologies.”

He snorted despite himself and took another lap around the pond, letting the water cool the heat rising at the back of his neck. By the time he returned, Isa had shifted again, now idly treading water, watching him with piercing, thoughtful eyes.

Regulus frowned. “What?”

She hesitated only a beat before asking, “What made you fall in love with him?”

Regulus froze mid-stroke, his body tensing at the bluntness of the question. Sure, he knew Isa was hardly the subtle type, but this was direct even for her standards.

He shot her a sarcastic glare in an attempt to disguise the discomfort at the private nature of the question. “Are we going to discuss boyfriends like a pair of girls, Nott?”

Isa barked out a sharp laugh. “ *No* ,” she said pointedly. Then, smirking, she flicked a handful of water his way. “But he was your boyfriend then?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, dodging the droplets. “No, of course not. That’s… that’s not a thing.”

Isa’s smirk faded into a small, almost sad smile. “Maybe not in our world, Reg, but outside of it, that’s definitely a thing.”

Regulus inhaled sharply, irritation prickling under his skin. “It’d creep even the most liberal people out, Ies, you know that. It’s… not normal.”

Isa’s expression didn’t waver as she repeated the sentence she’d said many times before but which now carried a whole new meaning.

“*All* love should be celebrated, Reg,” she said, her voice quiet but

firm.

Regulus met her gaze for a moment, unreadable, then shrugged, not eager to let the conversation spiral into one of Isa's endless rants about the wrongs and errors of the world they were raised in. Instead, he pushed off for another lap around the pond, hoping the subject would drop.

He should've known better, of course.

When he returned, Isa was still waiting, an expectant smirk curling her lips. "You didn't answer the question," she teased. "What made you fall in love with him?"

Regulus groaned. "I'm not asking you that question, am I?"

Isa grinned, flipping onto her back and kicking lazily. "Oh, if you want, I can list all the reasons why I fell in love with Nathan—"

Regulus groaned louder this time, sinking lower into the water. The scene from a few nights ago flashed unbidden in his mind — Isa and Davies kissing, Davies punching the wall in pure, raw emotion.

He exhaled, letting himself float for a moment, eyes fixed on the sky, fingers barely moving beneath the surface of the water. The light filtered through the leaves above, dappling the pond with shifting gold and green. His voice, when it came, was quiet.

"He makes me laugh."

The words felt foreign, almost ridiculous out loud. He winced internally — it sounded *awful* . But the harm was done now.

"He sees the fun in everything," he continued, his voice softer now, gaze still fixed on the sky.

He thought about the countless times Potter had made him laugh — truly laugh, unguarded and unrestrained. During Quidditch screenings, during practice, on the Beauxbatons grounds, in their dorm at the Palace. Even at the darkest of times Potter had found a way to drag it out of him, either with words or with his absurd antics.

Everywhere they had been together, Regulus had laughed, without limit, without restraint.

He could feel Isa's eyes on him, studying him, waiting for him to

continue.

“He sees the good in everything,” Regulus murmured, barely aware he was still speaking. His voice felt distant. “And everyone.”

I wish I could only see the good in you.

There were so many more things he could say, so many more reasons he could think of. How he’d always felt that he couldn’t feel that way with anyone, how he’d always felt like the odd one out among his friends – his friends who liked to snog and all that came with it. And his fear, his fear that it might not be for him – because he’d been left broken, that it might not be for him – after all that had been done to him. And then to meet him – so patient, so understanding, so loving, navigating through all of that and finding out that he could and wanted. Finding out he was still broken in many ways – yes – but also finding out that parts of him could perhaps heal.

He sighed, knowing he couldn’t get the words over his lips even if he’d wanted to. He felt Isa looking at him, her expression contemplative and awaiting. They locked gazes, the water between them rippling gently as they drifted.

Regulus pushed away the thoughts, eager to shift the conversation away from himself, away from him. He quickly composed himself and managed to conjure up a smirk.

“How about you, Nott? Care to share how Head Boy Davies managed to steal your heart? Tell me — was it the guitar or the eyes?”

Isa burst out laughing and splashed water in his face. “God, how shallow do you think I am?”

Regulus snorted. “Well, it’s what all the girls at Hogwarts talk about, isn’t it?”

Isa rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, he *is* incredibly handsome,” she said, a blush creeping on her face. “But … it’s not *that* what makes him… him.”

Regulus bit his laugh, not sure whether to find it annoying or endearing to see Isa blush over a bloke.

She ran a hand through the water. “He was polite. But not… not for the obvious reasons.”

Regulus smirked. “Like wanting to do you?”

Isa shot him a glare of pure exasperation. “Ha ha,” she deadpanned. “No. Nathan didn’t even like me at first. Thought I was just an obnoxious pureblood princess.”

Regulus grinned. “Well, he wasn’t *completely* wrong.”

Isa narrowed her eyes and splashed more water at him. “Funny, Reg.” She sighed, tilting her head back slightly. “No… Nathan doesn’t care about all of that — blood status, social expectations. He just… saw me as a *person*.”

She hesitated, then continued, voice quieter.

“He’s shown me there are people out there who really see your worth, you know?”

Isa paused, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. “I mean, I know *you’ve* always looked at me beyond… you know, first sight. But… not romantically.”

Regulus nodded. He knew how much it had always bothered her that people always saw her as the pretty one, the beautiful girl, whereas she had so much more to offer – people just didn’t reach that stage, didn’t get beyond her beauty to see her wit, her intelligence.

Isa took a breath, staring at the shifting reflections on the water. “If the world had been different, Reg, I know for sure it would’ve been me and him. We would’ve grown old together, happy and satisfied.”

Regulus sighed, unsure what to do now that she was definitely welling up – comforting her might just make her actually cry, but not doing anything felt strange, too.

Luckily, Isa composed herself almost instantly, letting out a sharp breath. Her voice was laced with a sudden bitterness. “Well… not that it matters anyway, right?” She gave a half-hearted shrug, staring off at the horizon. “That ship has sailed.”

Regulus nodded. “Yeah.”

And then — before he had time to register it — Isa lunged at him, hands pushing against his shoulders, shoving him under the water with a triumphant laugh.

Regulus spluttered as he resurfaced, shaking his hair from his eyes. "Oh, you're *dead* for that, Nott."

Isa only grinned, already swimming away.

And just like that, they dropped the topic of Davies and Potter — and didn't raise it again.

*****

Much of the time not spent with Isa, Regulus spent with Cissy instead. She kept inviting him over – Regulus knew she did it on purpose; inviting him over for dinner, asking to pop by for lunch. He knew she did it to make him feel at ease, to provide him her unwavering support, her show of solidarity as the days slowly passed and the inauguration drew closer.

She knew him better than most; definitely knew that Regulus would struggle with the idea of taking a life. Sure – he knew it was a necessity, he understood the need for it, knew it was simply the cost of the Revolution, but it did really do little to ease him up to the idea. Another major objection concerned the fact he'd have to do it with all the others around. The fact that he felt almost as equally dreadful for having to kill him as for having to do it in front of all the others made him positively sick with himself, but he couldn't help it. The idea of him becoming someone else, turning into someone under the watchful eyes of people like Mr. Nott and Bellatrix, Yaxley and the Lestranges… it haunted him at night.

Cissy must have sensed it all, and clearly thought that the best way for Regulus to cope with it was to have as much information as possible; to have a clear idea of what to expect and what was expected of him. Regulus was still torn between an overwhelming urge and curiosity to know and deep fear of the actual information, so he was glad that Cissy had made that decision for him.

The first thing she'd shared was the number. Twelve. Twelve initiates. Twelve people bearing the Mark. Twelve original Revolutionaries. The most loyal of the movement. And he – he would be one of them.

The names weren't surprising – they were basically the usual close circle, having attended the meetings from the beginning. Lucius, Thorne, Yaxley, the Lestrange brothers, Bellatrix, Dolohov, Travers, Mr. Carrow, Mr. Rosier, Mr. Nott.

And him.

Twelve people.

Which also meant that on that day, twelve people would die.

He would take one life. Eleven others would fall at the hands of his companions.

Regulus had never seen someone die before.

And in a few days, he would see twelve people die all at once.

Cissy had told him other information too – practical information. The marking wouldn't hurt; the branding of the Mark would be a bit uncomfortable, perhaps give some burning sensation, but it wouldn't hurt beyond that and it wouldn't hurt after, either.

There was a spell to conceal the Mark, too. This was particularly important for Regulus, for it wouldn't bode well for the entire Hogwarts student body to see him branded with the Mark. The symbol had become the universal sign of the Death Eaters, and having it tattooed to his arm, in the best case gave all his loyalties away, in the worst case his actual involvement in the Revolution. He couldn't risk getting expelled; him being at Hogwarts was essential, was the only thing he had to offer to the cause. Sure – his arms were nearly always covered, but on the rare occasions they weren't, he at least had a way to conceal it.

All of this information, though, seemed to sort of slip out of his mind or at least to the outer edges of it, when Cissy added that the sacrifices had already been captured. And of course, they were held captive in Bellatrix's basement.

His stomach twisted.

Regulus had a hard time not thinking about them. Twelve people, locked away in the dark, waiting for their end.

He honestly didn't know what was worse — the certainty of death, or the fact that they were trapped with her in the meantime. She wouldn't kill them, but Merlin knew what she did to them just for the mere fun of it.

Another piece of information that gnawed at his mind, that pulled his focus away from all the other information and details that Cissy had shared, was the name.

The name of the man he was to kill.

Baran Demir.

A Turkish pureblood. A child molester.

Dragged from a foreign prison, ripped from his cell in Turkey's version of Azkaban, for Regulus to kill off.

A demonstration of loyalty. A binding, irreversible connection to the Revolution. To the man leading it. A connection that would last for the rest of his life.

And yet, all the unnerving information, all nauseating facts that Cissy had shared with him in the first week of the summer holidays – all of it would all turn out to be completely, utterly insignificant in the wake of that last meeting. That final meeting, just days before the ritual, before the inauguration.

All the details – how Mr. Nott had personally captured at least three of the prisoners intended for the inauguration, how the ritual was to take place at Bellatrix's house, the incantation for the concealing charm, the potential sensation of bearing the Mark, the people who would be involved – even the name that had carved into his mind the name that haunted him in restless dreams, its letters floating and shifting before coming together again to form *Baran Demir* – all of it became meaningless by the end of that meeting.

*****

From the moment it began, Regulus had sensed something was off – there was a certain shift, a certain thickness in the air that made his skin prickle, that made an unease settling low in his stomach. He couldn't place it, couldn't properly define it, but something was different.

And surely, things *were* different; the meeting was uncharacteristically empty – Dolohov, the younger Lestrange, Travers, Mr. Nott, Mr. Rosier, and Mr. Carrow were all absent. More surprising perhaps even, was the fact that Cissy *was* there.

Regulus knew she knew most things — she was married to the second-in-command, after all, and had an uncanny talent for extracting information from anyone , anywhere, but she never attended these meetings. Unlike her sister, she was meant to stay out of the frontlines, and it was the frontlines that these meetings were

concerned with.

So maybe that was it. Maybe it was the missing faces. Maybe it was Cissy's presence.

Maybe that was why the atmosphere felt wrong.

Because it did. It was different.

The meeting itself hadn't been more interesting than usual; it was a recap of their efforts at the Ministry – but as many of the people concerned with the Ministry weren't there, there wasn't a lot to go with – and recent graduates from Hogwarts. Not many seemed promising this year, barring perhaps two; the largest wave of initiates would come next year and the year after; Regulus's friends, all eager, *dying* to serve the Revolution, to swear allegiance to the Dark Lord.

There wasn't much else covered beyond those topics — a quick review of practical matters concerning the inauguration, the time, the attendees. The meeting was uncharacteristically brief – not surprising given how few were present. Regulus was relieved; he had no interest in lingering around Bellatrix longer than absolutely necessary, especially as she seemed determined to get a rise out of him, to needle him about the upcoming ritual.

Because, of course, *of course* , she knew – knew that he didn't like it, didn't find it thrilling in the slightest he was expected to kill someone in front of an audience and to witness eleven others do the same.

Surely, she sensed his hesitation, and surely, she relished it, savoured it.

He was just about to rise from his seat, eager to leave, already halfway to the door when Cissy's voice stopped him.

"Reg?"

She was still seated, focused on a roll of parchment spread before her, a quill in her hand. The others around them were getting up too, making conversation or getting a drink from the table across the room.

"Yes?" Regulus asked, trying to hide the annoyance of being hindered from escaping the room as soon as possible.

"Could you grab me a fresh roll of parchment from that closet?" She

nodded toward a wooden cabinet near the door. “Top drawer.”

It was an odd request; she could’ve easily summoned it with her wand – but then again, he was closer, and she hadn’t yet reached for her wand. It wouldn’t have been much faster either way.

“Sure,” he said, already stepping toward the cabinet.

He pulled open the drawer and began sifting through its contents. It was surprisingly disorganised considering Bellatrix’s usual meticulousness. He grabbed a roll of parchment, unrolling it slightly to check if it was new, only to find writing scrawled across it. Used. He set it aside and grabbed another, unrolled it, found writing across it, and moved to another. The same.

Another.

And then—

His hands stilled.

Somehow, his eyes caught on something – a flicker of familiarity in the words scribbled ink drawing his attention.

Not just words. *Names.*

The name that had been burned into his mind for days, the name he had repeated until it lost all meaning, the name that had begun creeping into his dreams.

Baran Demir.

So this was the list – the hit list.

The names of the twelve prisoners. The ones being kept just two floors below. The ones who, in mere days, would be led to their deaths.

A sharp, uneasy weight crept into his chest. He didn’t linger on the names, didn’t want to; he wasn’t eager to attach identities to the bodies that would drop before his eyes. No, it was enough already to know the name of the man he was supposed to kill – something he could’ve done without, in all honesty. It was easier if they remained faceless, nameless, unreal in his mind.

Besides, he was positive that this list wasn’t meant for his eyes – he was only concerned with the man that he had to kill himself, not the others. He hadn’t been informed about them, and he was sure it was

on purpose; the less people knew, the better. That was how this worked.

Regulus exhaled sharply, forcing himself to roll the parchment back up, already turning to search for a fresh one.

And yet—

Something made him glance back.

His eyes flickered over the names again, scanning them almost absently.

Baran Demir.

Another.

And another.

And then—

His breath caught.

His pulse slammed against his ribs as his eyes landed on the last name on the list.

The letters blurred, then sharpened. He read them once.

Twice.

A third time.

No.

No fucking way.

Nathaniel Davies.

Chapter 25: Of Madness & Invisibility

Chapter Notes

Think about the warnings ;) Another longer chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nathaniel Davies.

With his heart still violently hammering against his ribs and the blood drained from his face, Regulus forced himself to roll the parchment back up and place it back in the drawer.

Slowly, he turned around, meeting Cissy's eyes.

Did she know?

Had she sent him to that drawer on purpose?

Was that why she was here, attending this meeting, in the first place?

Did she know who Davies was? That he was on this list? Had she meant for him to see it? Did she… did she want him to *do* something about it?

Yet, there was nothing in her expression to suggest that she had any idea what he had just read.

"Reg?" she prompted, raising an eyebrow as he remained frozen in place. "The parchment?"

Had she known? Was that why she hadn't just Accio'd it? Had she deliberately made him go through the drawer himself? Had she even *put* the roll there — ensuring he would find it, read it?

Had she wanted him to know but hadn't wanted to tell him?

Was she afraid someone might find out?

Surely, she was one of the few who knew exactly who was imprisoned in Bellatrix's basement. Likely, only the Dark Lord, Lucius, Bellatrix, Cissy and Thorne knew the full list. If something happened — if anything went wrong — she would be one of the first suspects.

If something happened.

Did she want him to *do* something?

“Reg?” Cissy’s voice sharpened slightly, her gaze now tinged with concern.

Regulus swallowed, mustering all the strength in his body and mind to compose himself, and then turned to the second drawer of the cupboard which was neatly stocked with fresh rolls of parchment. He grabbed one quickly and handed it over.

“Here you go,” he said smoothly, his face a masterpiece of composure with a kind, effortless smile and a light voice – even though his pulse pounded and his stomach churned. “See you later, Cissy.”

He nodded to the others with equal ease before turning on his heel and making his way to the fireplace in the Entrance Hall, trying everything in his might to suppress the raw panic clawing at every part of his body.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

What now?

*****

The sensation of utter, absolute, deadening panic that had mastered him was shortly interrupted by a flash of relief when he arrived at Black Manor and concluded that Isa wasn’t there; sure, it wasn’t really a surprise since it was already late and she rarely stayed the night these days, but well – the stakes were rather high. He truly, *truly* couldn’t face her right now.

Nathaniel Davies.

The supposed love of her life.

He had so many questions, yet there were also so many things that suddenly made sense.

So *that* was why Mr. Nott was at Hogwarts for the Quidditch match. Regulus had found it odd; it wasn’t as if Isa had been playing. And well, sure, Regulus was probably supposed to marry Isa someday, but he was hardly his son-in-law already and it seemed odd for Mr. Nott to waste his precious time on a Quidditch match at Hogwarts.

“I wouldn’t have missed it, not for this. And, of course, it was nice to see

Dora at school."

But he hadn't been there for Regulus.

He hadn't been there for Isa.

He had been there for *Davies*.

He had wanted to see the boy he was going to capture. The one he was going to kill a couple of days after.

He had wanted to watch him from a distance. Like a predator observing its prey before the attack.

And they hadn't been waiting all this time with the inauguration because of Regulus, waiting for him to finish term, no – they had waited all this time for *him*.

He flinched at his stupidity, at the pure idiocy of thinking that they had waited, had postponed the inauguration just for Regulus. Of course it hadn't been for him.

They had waited for Nathaniel Davies. Had waited for him to graduate, to step outside the safety of Hogwarts, to become an unnoticed, unmissed casualty of Magnus Alaric Nott.

They had known.

They had *always* known.

Had known about Isa and Davies.

The tension, the fights between Isa and her parents over Christmas and Easter — it all made perfect sense now.

All this time, they had known.

Mr. Nott had either gone through her mind and found him there, or Isa – in a spur of hope, a spur of desperation – hadn't been able to stop herself from telling them. Had told her parents she'd fallen in love with Nathaniel Davies. Had clung to some naive, ridiculous belief that if she just explained, if she just *told* them how wonderful he was and how much they loved each other, they might understand, might hear her out.

Stupid.

So fucking *stupid*.

Of course, her father wouldn't listen, wouldn't understand, wouldn't hear her out.

Of course, her father wouldn't tolerate it.

Losing his eldest daughter — the fierce, beautiful Isadora Elowyn Nott — to a halfblood with a guitar, a boy with no history, no lineage, no place in their world?

Never.

How often had Regulus warned her, told her, that this would happen? Again and again, he had warned her.

This was always how it would end.

Oh, Mr. Nott had probably been very calm about it — strict, firm, resolute, but calm. Told her it wasn't happening and that was that.

And Isa would have – through all pain and disappointment – felt relief too; relief that at least Regulus hadn't been right about *that*. That Regulus had been proven wrong, that while her father might not tolerate it, might put his foot down, at least he didn't want to hurt Davies. Didn't wish him harm.

Regulus almost laughed at the thought.

Mr. Nott had been planning to kill him all along. He had simply waited for him to graduate. It would be quieter that way, it would draw less attention; no missing Hogwarts student, no investigation, no questions.

And then, then the perfect opportunity had presented itself.

They all needed to kill someone, all needed a sacrifice. And they didn't want it to be meaningless, random, worthless.

Magnus Alaric Nott must not have thought twice when the topic arose. Must not have thought about it for more than a split second.

It was to be him. It was to be the boy who had stolen his eldest daughter's heart. The first to take her heart and her body.

It was the most symbolic murder he could commit — killing the bloke who had stolen his daughter from him. Who had filled her head with

foolish ideas about the modern world and a woman's place in it. And Mr. Nott would emerge victorious, the undisputed winner of this battle. And by this – by the Mark branded into his skin, he would be reminded of that victory; the constant reminder etched into flesh, worn like a seal of triumph. A triumph of control, of power. A triumph of choosing his daughter's future for her.

Regulus exhaled sharply, sinking onto the edge of his bed.

He was positive there wasn't a drop of blood left in his face and his throat was so dry he was sure his voice had disappeared.

So she had lied. She had lied to him.

"Don't you think I'm in danger, Reg?"

"This — what's happening with you — it's a wake-up call. You know my dad, Reg."

"You know what he'd do if he found him in my mind."

But her father had already known. Had seen Davies in her mind long ago.

And not just her father – Thorne had known, too. Regulus suddenly understood Thorne's gaze, months ago, when he had come over to collect the *Pure Quill* during the Easter Holidays – when Regulus had said that Isa wasn't his girlfriend.

Thorne had studied him for a long moment, his gaze unreadable and penetrating, before saying – *"Yes, I know."*

He knew – knew about Isa and Davies. It wasn't surprising; they had both been students of his, and he was a very sharp, observant man.

Regulus sighed.

She had lied to him; knowing that Regulus wouldn't take it from her if only he had to gain something from it. Knew he'd never have accepted her surrendering her body, the most intimate version of herself, if it were to save just *him*. No – he'd always thought that this had, at least partially, been for her sake too.

And she hadn't told him about her parents to protect him; had probably managed to convince her parents that all of it, everything between her and Davies, had been done behind Regulus's back. Had

convinced him that she had betrayed Regulus behind his back with a halfblood modernist.

And she hadn't gained anything from it. She had given her soul, her body to Regulus in an act of complete selflessness. She had loved Davies all the time, always, and had still given herself to Regulus without gaining anything from it.

Fuck.

She would never, ever forgive him. Would never, ever forgive her father for killing Davies. Wouldn't be able to look her father in the eyes, be in the same room.

Regulus's thoughts spiralled.

Would it mean the end of her faith in their world? Would it mark, set in motion, the end of her faith in traditionalism? Would it drive her – Isa, the eldest of the Nott family, having some issues with their world but not substantial enough to do something as radical as leaving it – to the other side? Would it be the final blow pushing her into the arms of modernism?

She'd never, ever forgive him, Regulus, either. She'd never forgive him for letting it happen. For letting her father kill Davies.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

And he?

Could he?

Could he forgive himself for not doing anything – *anything* – knowing that they were going to kill the bloke Isa loved?

After all that she'd done for him?

All the sacrifices she'd made for him?

Her endless support – the dreamless sleep potions, the comfort her lap had always provided – better even with her hands going through his hair… The way she had reacted to him confessing his love for Potter. Oh, how often he'd berated her for having a relationship with a halfblood Ravenclaw, and her nonjudgmental, unwavering support as he'd confessed his love for a *Gryffindor*, a *Potter*, a *bloke*…

Instead of all the things he'd expected her to do, all the things many

people would've done… she'd offered her unconditional help, her comfort, her reassurance. Weeks filled with Occlumency, all her time and effort and energy consumed by helping him.

"You're my best friend, Reg. All of you. Every part of you is my best friend. I couldn't hate you even if I tried."

And then, the ultimate sacrifice.

He knew better than anyone what the sacrifice had entailed. He knew better than anyone the sacredness of intimacy, the sacredness of the body and the soul. And she'd given it all to save him.

No, he *had* to do something. He couldn't live with himself knowing that he had done absolutely nothing.

Yet – there was hardly anything he *could* do. The bloke had been captured by Mr. Nott – positively one of the slyest and most cunning people Regulus knew — and was held in the basement of Bellatrix — positively one of the most sadistic people Regulus knew.

How was he to free Davies from *Bellatrix's* basement, captured by *Mr. Nott* – the man who had even managed to smuggle some child molester out of the Turkish Azkaban? How could he outmanoeuvre two of the most dangerous people out there?

No, there was no way. No way to cross these people. No way to do anything about Davies's fate.

It was the hard, cold but undeniable truth; he couldn't do anything. There was nothing he could do.

The entire night his mind went through the same train of thought on repeat, as if caught in a loop. He *had* to do something – but he couldn't. There was no way. But he *had* to do – or at least, he *had* to *want* to do something, right? But the thought, just the idea of trying to cross both Mr. Nott and Bellatrix – it was equally laughable as it was terrifying.

No, there simply was no way.

Truly the only thing he, perhaps, *could* do was to have it confirmed. Confirmed that he couldn't do anything about it. That it was outside his control. So that, if Isa ever learned the truth, learned of the fact that the love of her life had been killed and Regulus had known it was going to happen, that she at least knew that he hadn't been able to do

anything about it. That it had been beyond his reach, beyond his power.

Yes, that he could do.

It was the least he could do. The least he owed her — to have irrefutable, indisputable, undeniable proof that he hadn't been able to stop it. That he had been utterly powerless, paralysed by the situation.

So, pushing that thought to the front of his mind as it was the only thing keeping him from going completely mad, he got up in the morning and took an ice-cold shower.

He was halfway through pulling on his underclothes, still toweling his hair, when he heard the familiar sound of Isa knocking on the door.

"Come in," he said, quickly reaching for his robes.

"Hi Reg," she said while opening the door, "I was wondering whether you'd be awake already, I was so bored–" her sharp gaze swept over him, a flicker of curiosity across her eyes as they landed on his robes.

"You're dressing up," she observed, stepping into the room.

He looked up and met her inquisitive brown eyes, and immediately, emotions cut through him, clawing at his chest — guilt, dread, *so* much dread.

If she knew — knew where Davies was right now. Knew what he had probably been subjected to all this time in Bellatrix's basement.

If she knew what was going to happen to him in just a few days...

Regulus turned away, adjusting the folds of his cloak.

He couldn't do it. Couldn't face her. Couldn't have her around.

Swallowing hard, he lifted his gaze to hers. Her brows furrowed slightly, sensing something was off, but before she could speak, he gestured for her to come closer.

"Come here," he said, his voice commanding but kind.

She hesitated for the briefest moment before stepping toward him, settling at the edge of his bed.

"All right," he started, forcing his voice to remain level. "Ies… when

are you leaving for Damascus?"

"A week from now," she said, tilting her head.

A week. A few days after the inauguration. She would go to Damascus, accompanying her father — the man who would have just killed the love of her life.

Regulus exhaled. "Alright, Ies, I…" He hesitated, then forced himself to continue. "I'm working on something."

Isa's expression shifted to one of curiosity and intrigue. "For the revolution?"

He nodded. "Yes. But I need complete focus – no distractions. Not for the next few days."

Isa studied him, lips pressing together. Then, slowly, she nodded, realising where Regulus was going with this. "So… it's better if I leave for a couple of days?"

Regulus gave a single, firm nod. "Yes. Just… come by before you go to Damascus, alright?" He inhaled sharply. "But I really — *really* — need to concentrate on things until then."

She was still watching him, searching. He saw the conflict in her – how badly she wanted to ask for details, to let her know what was going on.

Impressively, and very uncharacteristically, though, she bit her tongue and didn't ask.

"Alright, Reg. I'll pop by before I leave."

He nodded again, feeling her arms wrap around him in a tight hug. She smelled of vanilla — fresh and familiar.

He flinched.

Oh, if she only knew…

*****

The only person he could get information from without raising any suspicion was, of course, Cissy. She was the only one he'd ever discussed the inauguration with. It would seem odd if he brought it up with anyone else. Besides, as they had been having several meals

together over the past week or so, it wouldn't be strange for him to stop by for lunch.

He would find out whatever he could, gather the information, and store it away neatly in his mind, ordered and categorised, ready to be used when the time came. Ready to be used as proof for Isa — to show her that he hadn't been able to do anything. That he had been sidelined, rendered powerless. That he had been hopeless. Outwanded.

Because there was simply no way. No way to cross, to outsmart Mr. Nott and Bellatrix. There simply was no way.

With a forced air of normalcy, Regulus stepped out of the Entrance Hall at Cissy's place and made his way to the morning room. He was met with the smell of eggs, buttered toast, smoked kippers and freshly brewed tea, betraying that Cissy had already started on lunch. He knew Lucius had been occupied with the Revolution, so he expected Cissy to be alone — perhaps with Aunt Druella at most.

But as he pushed open the door, he halted, for Cissy was not alone.

Sitting at the table with her, stirring a cup of coffee lazily, was Professor Thorne.

Shit.

Well. That was the end of his plan.

Cissy looked up, smiling warmly. "Hi, Reg," she greeted, gesturing for him to join them.

Regulus hesitated. "Sorry," he said immediately, lingering at the threshold. "I — I assumed you'd be alone. Am I interrupting?"

Thorne smirked, setting down his cup. "Not in the slightest," he drawled. "The more, the merrier."

Regulus nodded stiffly and took a seat.

Cissy wasted no time in pushing food onto his plate, arranging toast and eggs in front of him almost feverishly.

"What brings you here spontaneously?" she asked, pouring him a cup of tea.

Regulus lifted a shoulder in an easy shrug. "Nothing – I was just bored."

Thorne let out a quiet snort. “Ah — Miss Nott too busy for you, Mr. Black?”

Regulus kept his expression neutral as he reached for his fork. “Yes, I guess.”

Cissy tilted her head. “Is she in Damascus already?”

Regulus shook his head. “No, they’re leaving in a week, I believe.”

Thorne hummed, tapping his fingers idly against the table. “Yes. They are.”

Cissy turned to Thorne. “Weren’t you joining Magnus at some point?”

“A day prior to the rest of the Notts,” Thorne nodded. “We have some business to handle.”

Silence settled over the table, the only sounds the clink of cutlery and the occasional scrape of a chair shifting against the floor.

It was Thorne who broke the quiet.

“You nervous?”

Regulus looked up from his eggs. Cissy was watching him now, too, her expression unreadable.

He knew instantly what he meant.

“A bit,” Regulus admitted.

Thorne nodded knowingly. “I can imagine.”

Regulus inhaled carefully. This was his bridge — his way in. Perhaps he *could* discuss it with Thorne around. He’d just have to do it subtly. Not raise any suspicions. Not seem too eager.

Slowly, he set his fork down, choosing his words carefully. He decided to start with a question that had been clawing at his mind for weeks. “How – how does it feel?”

Thorne’s lips curled slightly. “To kill someone?”

Regulus gave a small, silent nod.

Thorne leaned back in his chair, considering. “Well,” he mused, “it’s

actually rather mundane." He lifted his cup and took a slow sip. "But you're going to do it premeditatedly. That's different for a first time. It would've been easier if it had been… spontaneous."

Regulus swallowed. His voice came out quieter. "A self-defense situation."

Thorne inclined his head in agreement.

Regulus turned slightly toward Cissy, pretending to search for confirmation — his tone almost matter-of-fact. "So… all of them are already captured?"

Cissy nodded.

Regulus's fingers curled slightly around his fork. "They're just… waiting?"

She hesitated and didn't quite meet his eyes, instead focusing on slicing a piece of toast. "Yeah."

His heart pounded against his ribs. He was about to ask the only question that mattered – the only question worth asking.

He forced his voice to stay steady, ignoring the sweat forming on his palms. Swallowing hard, he braced himself — for the question and the answer he already dreaded.

"You're sure they can't escape?"

Cissy glanced at Thorne. A flicker of something passed between them — then Thorne snorted.

"There's no better-secured place than your cousin's cellar," he said easily, reaching for the sugar bowl. "Everything is watched. Every movement, every breath accounted for. Nothing gets past her." He dropped a spoonful of sugar into his coffee, stirring leisurely. "Wards on every door, anti-apparition spells — nothing human gets in from the outside. And even if you *could* get out from the inside…" He gave a low chuckle, tapping his spoon against the rim of his cup. "Well, you'd be noticed before you even took a step."

Regulus nodded numbly.

This was it.

This was exactly what he'd suspected.

There was no way.

No way to break into Bellatrix's cellar without her knowing. And if she knew he was trying to free Davies – well, it'd be quicker to kill himself outright.

His grip on his fork slackened slightly.

He had already known, yet, to have it confirmed like this, so final, made his stomach churn. The tiny, faintest, flickering, naive idea that there perhaps *might* be a way was now completely, utterly shattered.

Still — deep down, buried under layers and layers of dread and guilt — he felt something far worse.

Relief.

The realisation sickened him – he *hated* himself for it. But there it was. If there had been even the slightest chance, he would've had to try. And the thought of trying to free Davies from Bellatrix's grasp… just *thinking* about it made him nauseous beyond comprehension.

So maybe — maybe it was better this way. It was, at any rate, easier this way. Yes, although it sickened him, made him positively nauseous, he felt relief too; relief that at least he didn't need to try. Relief that he didn't have to risk it all.

That is – until that statement.

Until that last statement, mentioned in a nonchalant manner so highly contrasting with its severe consequences that it almost made Regulus laugh.

That last statement that changed everything.

"Unless," Thorne said, shrugging while stirring his coffee absentmindedly. "Unless they can become invisible. I guess that's the only way they'd be able to get out."

Regulus's breath hitched.

His throat turned dry as his stomach plummeted.

So there *was* a way.

Not an easy way, not an obvious one either. But there was a way.

A way for Davies to become invisible. A way for him to escape.

Regulus sighed.

The cloak.

*****

"*Nothing human gets in from the outside… and even if you could get out from the inside… you'd be noticed before you even took a step.*"

"Unless they can become invisible. I guess that's the only way they'd be able to get out."

Regulus lay awake the entire night, turning those words over and over in his mind. Repeating them. Rearranging them. Breaking them apart and piecing them back together again. Over and over, in an endless loop, he went over the sentences, until he realised he hadn't really slept, yet hadn't been really awake either. He'd drifted in that strange place between consciousness and unconsciousness for hours, the sentences circling his mind like a relentless tide.

They were the key.

They offered all the information he needed.

He felt it – felt it deep in his gut, in his subconscious.

He was completely overwhelmed, completely numbed by all the feelings and thoughts – the determination, the *knowledge* that the key lay within these words. The need to solve the puzzle, to get it, to comprehend it, to *know* it warned with the fear, the dread, the utter terror of realising that if he indeed did solve that puzzle, he'd have to act on it.

And then came the sinking realisation: perhaps he was just going insane. Surely no one could feel so many sensations, think so many thoughts, endure so many trials in his life and still be sane?

He pushed it all away, focused on the sentences again.

"*Nothing human gets in from the outside… and even if you could get out from the inside… you'd be noticed before you even took a step.*"

"Unless they can become invisible. I guess that's the only way they'd be

able to get out."

The answer was there. He just had to decipher it.

He drifted for hours, the sentences growing louder, then fading into whispers, echoing in his mind in some twisted rhythm.

And then—

It hit him like a lightning strike.

His eyes snapped open.

That was it.

One part of the puzzle had been clear from the beginning — he needed to be invisible.

The cloak.

An Invisibility Cloak was the only way. The only way to truly disappear. He knew enough about them to be sure — other forms of magic could be traced by something as simple as a Homenum Revelio, let alone the countless enchantments and wards Bellatrix had undoubtedly placed on her basement.

The cloak was the only way to become untouchable. Untraceable.

No, the true revelation lay in the other piece of the puzzle.

Nothing human gets in from the outside.

Nothing human could get in. Not on its own, at least. But what if he were to accompany something non-human?

House Elves.

House Elves could apparate everywhere, even at Hogwarts.

And Bellatrix — she used her House Elf for every menial task imaginable. She wouldn't have warded the basement against Black family House Elves.

No — Regulus was certain. A Black House Elf could get into her basement.

Whiskerley.

Whiskerley could apparate him straight inside.

With the cloak, they'd be completely invisible – with a Muffliato, completely silent.

Yes, this was it. This was the way.

Holy shit. He had solved it.

There was only one problem.

How the hell was he going to get his hands on that bloody cloak?

*****

Regulus didn't eat for two days.

For two days, he sat. Lay. Paced. Thought.

Time was slipping through his fingers. The clock was ticking. The inauguration was nearing.

How the hell was he supposed to get his hands on Potter's cloak without anyone knowing?

Every possibility ran through his mind, one after the other, each more improbable than the last.

He could meet up with Potter and steal it from him – but then Potter had to want to meet up with him, and very quickly too, since the inauguration was in two days already *and* Regulus would have to be able to steal the cloak from him.

Unlikely.

He could meet Potter and *ask* for it. Say he desperately needed it for something. Swear he'd return it. Even come up with some ridiculous lie. But then Potter would have to agree, would have to believe him, and — most importantly— not mind lending him his most valuable possession.

Highly unlikely.

He could tell Potter the truth. Tell him Davies was being held there, that he needed the cloak to break him out. But then Potter would have to keep his mouth shut. Because his parents couldn't know – the very people at the heart of the modernists, the very people leading the

charge against Regulus's own.

Not a fucking chance.

He could lure Potter somewhere under false pretenses, maybe even go in disguise, and then steal it. But that meant finding a way to lure Potter away fast. And Regulus would still have to actually steal the cloak.

Again, unlikely.

He could just Floo over, walk into his house, and snatch it.

He laughed at the thought.

Fucking bloody insane.

He laughed even harder when, after, that would be the option he'd actually choose.

*****

Less than three days. Less than three days were left to free Davies when the answer came. And the answer came in a very unexpected way – the Daily Prophet.

For the first time in years, he hadn't touched a newspaper in days, too consumed by his thoughts, by the events rendering him completely numb to bother reading the news. He opened the paper and quickly came to realise there was hardly anything noteworthy in it – no major incidents, no ridiculous new law proposals as the Ministry was in recess. Even the front page, for once, wasn't filled with warnings of the 'looming war' but with last-minute predictions about the Quidditch match between Puddlemere United and the Montrose Magpies.

He sighed and pushed the paper aside, rising to pour himself some coffee, praying the aroma would wake him properly.

Gods, he'd kill for a lap on his broom right now — the wind in his hair, the sun on his face…

His mind wandered, unbidden, to the one person he'd come to associate with Quidditch. Potter. So maddeningly effortless, so breathtaking in the air…

And then, as he lifted the cup to his lips—

He remembered.

“ This might be the most entertaining thing I’ll see all summer – and that’s saying something, considering I’m going to the match between Puddlemere United and the Montrose Magpies.”

His heart stopped.

The cup slipped from his fingers, shattering on the floor. Coffee splattered across the tiles.

The match.

Potter was going to the match.

Potter wouldn’t be home.

Surely — surely — he wouldn’t bring his cloak, his most valuable possession, to a Quidditch match?

Regulus exhaled sharply and stumbled back into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

Was he losing it?

Was he spiralling?

Had he officially gone mad?

Was he seriously considering Flooing into Potter Manor to steal the cloak?

Could he even floo there, still? Surely, after everything, the Potters had upgraded their security. Everyone had upgraded their security, even nobodies — people no one could be bothered attacking — had reinforced their wards. And the Potters… the Potters were at the heart of Dumbledore’s circle. Surely Regulus Black couldn’t just step through their fireplace?

Even more so now that Potter *knew* — knew that Regulus sat at the Dark Lord’s table.

It would be incredibly, incredibly stupid if they hadn’t closed off their fireplace to him.

It would be the height of stupidity if they hadn’t.

And yet, still – he had an inkling.

An inkling that, because Potter always believed in the best of people, always tried to focus on the best of people, perhaps Regulus could still do it. Could still get through that fireplace. That Potter, if he'd thought about it at all, wouldn't have wanted to shut him out completely.

And then — Mrs. Potter.

Her words, so vividly clear in his mind despite the months that had passed since she'd said them.

"My door is always open to you — you are always welcome in my home."

It was a long stretch. A *very* long shot. Definitely part of some foolish, wishful thinking.

But perhaps — *perhaps* — she'd meant those words *literally*?

Still, even *if* he could step through the fireplace, he'd have to make it through the house unseen.

Still, even if he *could* step through that fireplace… He'd have to make it through the house without being seen. The portraits, the artifacts, the magical detection devices… all capable of spotting him. Sure, he could use a Disillusionment Charm, but it wouldn't make him invisible to all of these.

And then — the cloak. It had to be in the bloody house in the first place, *and* Regulus had to be able to find it.

He exhaled, deep and desperate.

What were the fucking odds?

*****

Regulus was sure he had gone completely mad when he took off his shoes in front of the fireplace.

He realised that he had survived so much — endured enough horror, trauma, and sheer absurdity — that, really, his descent into lunacy was actually long overdue .

He laughed at the thought. Hard and loud, the sound echoing through the cavernous drawing room.

Oh, he had *lost* it.

He was actually going to do it. Floo to the Potters. Steal the cloak. Break into Bellatrix's house. Try to free Davies.

Probably die in the process, too.

Yes. he had gone completely, utterly mad.

Shoving the thought aside, he strode deeper into the drawing room, testing the floor beneath his socked feet.

He laughed again.

If someone could *see* him now — Regulus Arcturus Black, Heir to the most Noble and Ancient House of Black – gliding through the dimly lit room like some deranged dancer, shifting his weight from foot to foot, cataloging the creaks in the floorboards. A step too heavy here. A traitorous joint there.

He ran a hand through his curls, massaging his temples, heart pounding so violently he could feel it in his throat.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Occasionally, the sheer ridiculousness of it all would overwhelm him, and he'd let out another burst of laughter, breathless and unhinged.

Oh, the *insanity* of what he was about to do.

Enough.

He took a steadying breath, turned back to the fireplace, and nodded.

"Fuck it," he whispered. " This isn't even the hardest part."

Being found in Potter's house – sure, it'd be uncomfortable, awkward; he'd have to come up with some truly spectacular excuse if he got caught. But Merlin – he could always pull *the* card, couldn't he? Claim that he'd popped by to declare his undying love for James Potter. His mother, and probably his father too, knew already. Even the stupid werewolf knew. The real problem would be Sirius – and well, since Potter wouldn't want to get beaten up like a good old Muggle over it, he'd be forced to come up with some explanation. Potter was always inventful. He'd probably come up with something related to Beauxbatons or something. Yes – definitely .

It would be excruciating, humiliating and would certainly mean the end of Davies's rescue, but Regulus – Regulus would live.

No, the real problem would come after he'd gotten inside.

After he'd found the stupid cloak .

If he found the cloak.

With a final sigh, he stepped into the fireplace, turned to face the drawing room, and tossed down the Floo powder, wand clutched tightly in his other hand.

Green fire roared around him, swallowing him whole.

The instant he arrived, he cast a Disillusionment Charm. He was fairly sure that he'd been quick enough, but still he stood frozen in the cosy, elegant entrance of Potter Manor for a moment, pulse thudding in his ears. Had any of the portraits seen him?

The green flames were a dead giveaway — if the paintings were meant to monitor the Floo, the Potters would know someone had arrived. But no alarm sounded, no hurried footsteps approached…

Regulus let out a breath.

Potter Manor.

Regulus snorted wryly, silently – third's a charm. His third time at Potter Manor. The second time he'd – hopefully – get past the Entrance Hall.

He had to get to the bedroom – Potter's bedroom. If the cloak was in the house, it would definitely be in his bedroom, either on his bed or on his desk.

Ensuring that, in fact, nothing had come after him, he tiptoed to the stairs. He felt a sense of relief at the fact that he had, apparently, been able to floo to Potter Manor, and pushed all the accompanying sensations far, far away – the disbelief that the Potters were *actually* stupid enough to leave the fireplace open, but also the terrifying dread that he was now getting closer to finding the cloak. The cloak that would force him to go after Davies.

Fuck.

One disaster at a time.

He climbed the stairs, each step slow, deliberate, barely breathing as he went.

Oh, if they found him here. If *Sirius* found him here. Knowing exactly where to go. Knowing his way to Potter's bedroom by heart. And Sirius — finding him walking there, without his bloody shoes.

The decision to go there on socks had been as comical as it had been necessary – a Muffliato could only be cast on an enclosed or static space, and Regulus was moving, which meant he couldn't silence himself. The only way to make it across the wooden floors of the first-floor landing was like this — soft-footed, silent.

At least that wouldn't be a problem if he got as far as walking around with Davies under the cloak. That was an enclosed space – he could cast the spell there, even on the move.

His stomach tightened at the thought of creeping through Bellatrix's house under the cloak.

Again – one bloody disaster at a time.

Regulus moved forward and found himself in Potter's bedroom quicker than he could've imagined.

The moment he stepped inside, the scent hit him.

Musky and fresh. Broomstick wax, something warm, something inviting. His throat went dry, the ache sudden, brutal. He'd forgotten what it was like, how much it could hurt — the want, the craving, the desire to, just for a second, sink into it, press his face into the pillow and breathe him in.

Potter's bed had smelled like this more than anything else. That scent had clung to Regulus long after he'd left, woven into his clothes, his skin. Him.

And now — now, standing here, the memories slammed into him full force.

Potter, fast asleep in his arms, his hair tickling against Regulus's chest. His glasses abandoned on the nightstand, leaving his face soft, open, peaceful. That tiny, unconscious smile tugging at his lips, as if even in sleep, he was completely content. Which he, knowing Potter, probably was.

And hor Regulus had kissed him there, had rolled them over and pinned him to the mattress, had kissed him desperately until they were both gasping. And how Potter had laughed against his lips before sinking lower, lower — bracing a hand against Regulus's thigh, his breath warm against his skin.

"You're so beautiful."

The memory sent a violent shudder through him.

How he had bent to him when Potter had taken him into his mouth, how everything else had ceased to exist, how all that had mattered in that moment was the way Potter felt, his mouth warm and wet, his tongue maddingly teasing as complete ecstasy had mastered him–

He swallowed.

The cloak.

He needed the cloak.

His head snapped up, dragging himself back to the present, to the reason he was here.

His eyes flicked to the bed first – nothing.

Shit.

The desk, then.

He crossed the room, carefully lifting the scattered books, parchment, anything that might be hiding it — nothing.

Fuck.

His stomach twisted.

Had he brought it with him? Had he truly brought the cloak – his most valuable possession – to the Quidditch match? Had he planned some stupid prank with Sirius and the others that he needed it for? *Shit.*

But then—

There.

Draped over the back of a chair near the window, carelessly discarded

like it was nothing.

Regulus let out a slow, shaky breath.

It was not nothing. No – for once, he understood Potter. Understood him completely with his love for the cloak. It was truly the most valuable thing in the world.

He reached for it, fingers brushing the silvery fabric, the material rippling like liquid light over his hands.

The most valuable thing in the world – lives depended on it now.

*****

For the second time that day, he paced the drawing room in his socks.

Technically, he could keep his shoes on this time, but he'd felt quick, smooth and sneaky in socks at Potter Manor — and if, Merlin forbid, he had to rely on Disillusionment Charms again without the safety of a Muffliato, he'd better not be wearing shoes.

So many things could go wrong.

He had explained to Whiskerley that she had one job — Apparate them both into the basement, cloaked, and then Apparate away.

The ideal plan — the *best* plan — would be for Whiskerley to bring them straight back to Black Manor. But the problem was, Regulus had no idea what the basement looked like, let alone with twelve captives in it, and they couldn't, under any circumstance, be seen.

Back at Hogwarts, in the antechamber, it had been nearly impossible to stay hidden under the cloak, and that had only been him and Potter. Davies was taller than Potter – they would barely fit together — let alone with Whiskerley.

Besides, there was every chance they wouldn't be able to Apparate out at all. Bellatrix might have an alarm in place — one that detected movement into the basement, one that triggered the moment anything moved in or out. Because Regulus was absolutely certain, with every part of his body and mind alike, that the instant Davies vanished — everyone in the house would be on top of them, searching for him.

No, Regulus had instantly concluded that the safest option was perhaps the least likely one; Bellatrix would anticipate magical

infiltration, magical escape. She'd never expect a captive to do something as simple and something as Muggle-like as just walking out of the house.

Whiskerley would Apparate him as close as possible to Davies and then leave. If they weren't immediately detected, he'd have a moment to *assess* the basement. Then he'd throw the cloak over Davies — *hopefully* prompting someone to open the door. And then—

Showtime.

Truly so many things could go wrong.

He had no idea what the basement looked like, no idea who was guarding it, no idea what sort of protections were in place. No clue what — or who — he would be up against.

It was, in truth, nothing short of a suicide mission.

Fuck, fuck fuck.

Regulus exhaled sharply.

He had to do this. Had to try. Merlin knew he owed it to Isa. To his best friend. His best friend who had sacrificed so much for him.

He owed it to her.

But, *fuck,* was he afraid. Was he terrified to the bone, to the last drop of blood in his veins, to the very last pore of the very last patch of skin on his body.

Should he have written a will?

How did that work, anyway? He was a custodian of Black Manor and Seacliff Hall – surely that didn't mean he could pass it on to someone in the case he died?

Or could he?

Who would he leave his estates to?

Isa? Sure, she didn't need them — her family was already one of the wealthiest in the country. They had estates scattered across the world, more than they could possibly use.

The only other person he wouldn't mind giving his possessions to was

Potter.

The thought made him burst out laughing, right there in the middle of the drawing room.

Just the idea of him being caught trying to free Davies — Isa's halfblood lover who he supposedly knew nothing about — then being killed for it by Bellatrix and Mother discovering that he'd left everything to James Potter.

The thought was so bizarre, so ridiculous that it made him double over in laughter on the floor, tears streaming down his cheeks as he pictured the face of Mother — losing her favourite son to Potter as a best friend, and then her only remaining hope to him as—

His lover.

Oh, Mother's hatred for Potter would be unfathomable, unparalleled – a level of loathing the world had never seen before.

Regulus was shaking with laughter now, sitting on the floor, the sound echoing through the vast room, the sheer ridiculousness of him sitting there only making him laugh harder.

But then, at some point, he sighed.

How had life become this complicated?

He flinched.

It *had* to work. He couldn't be caught. He had to free him.

For Isa.

Regulus took a breath, steeling himself.

"Whiskerley!"

*****

Regulus had never set foot inside Bellatrix's basement. It was neither small nor large – but for twelve people, it was suffocating.

He had expected cages. Had imagined Bellatrix treating them like beasts, locking them behind iron bars, stripping them of their last shreds of dignity. He had braced himself for the necessity of breaking Davies out of one, of forcing open some rusted lock.

But there were none.

No cages. No barriers.

Instead, there was nothing.

Just the cold marble floor and the twelve figures strewn across it – more corpses than men, more ghosts than living things. The air was thick with the nauseating stench of blood and sweat, of despair left to rot in the dark.

Regulus's throat went dry.

The only light came from somewhere above — a flickering, sickly glow that cast shadows against the stone walls, the unnatural shapes of the captives' bodies giving the room an even more haunted feel. Apart from the eerie shadows, the walls were streaked with old blood, dried into dark, rust-coloured stains.

Just the thought of what had happened in this room — whose blood it was that covered the walls…

It made him shudder.

Still, it was nothing compared to the cold, terrifying shiver that seized him when his gaze fell to the centre of the room.

Chains hung from the ceiling, swaying slightly, as if they had come alive, feeding from the people they held that had faded away, piece by piece. Beneath them, the floor was darker than anywhere else.

He flinched.

He didn't look at the others — he just couldn't. He just couldn't let his gaze linger on the captives, couldn't let himself dwell on the fact that one of them was his. That there was one he was meant to kill in just a day.

Still, the swift glance across the room had been enough to see the slumped bodies of people who might never stand again. The hollow eyes, the expressions betraying that they had long ago stopped hoping for salvation.

Regulus forced it all aside, shoving it into the depths of his mind. He was here for one person only. There was only one person who mattered.

Davies.

He was still on his feet – that was something.

He was leaning against the wall, probably stretching his legs — probably trying to keep them from locking up completely. A flicker of relief sparked in Regulus's chest – at least Davies could walk. He hadn't even considered that before, but now, thirty seconds into this basement, he realised how easily it could have been different. He could have easily found Davies too weak to move, could easily have been forced to carry him through Bellatrix's halls.

His face was gaunt, the sharp cut of his cheekbones even more pronounced. The golden warmth in his skin — the colour that had driven half the girls at Hogwarts mad — was completely gone, replaced by a sickly, lifeless shade of pale.

But it was his eyes that hit Regulus like a knife to the gut. Like a jinx to the chest. Like a hand closing around his throat.

Davies's eyes — always vivid, twinkling green — were blurred, unfocused. Lifeless and empty. Yes, he was still breathing, but some part of him might have already left.

Regulus swallowed hard, forcing himself to stay focused. Sweat gathered at his temples, his pulse hammering behind his ribs, each thud reverberating through his skull. But it was distant. His body was reacting — fear, adrenaline, panic — but his mind was sharper than he had thought possible.

Move.

Now.

One door. That was all.

It had to open when Davies vanished. It had to be their way out. Their escape. Davies's freedom.

He swallowed again and stepped behind Davies, soundless as a shadow. The only thing he heard was the violent pounding of his own heart and the faint, ragged breathing of the captives.

Lifting his wand, he cast a non-verbal Muffliato, praying that exhaustion and stress hadn't weakened his magic.

Then, he exhaled, steadying himself, and leaned in close.

Low, quiet, lethal.

“Don’t move. Don’t make a sound.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh just two chapters left for this book; definitely one of my favs, too!

Chapter 26: Of Escaping & Killing

Chapter Notes

> Alright, what was supposed to be ... half a chapter eventually became a whole chapter when I added some stuff. So I've decided to split it in two. It does take away the balance of the chapter a bit; this chapter is now dark (also for my dark chapters' standards). A much lighter chapter will follow, though, and it's one of my absolute faves, so bear with Reg for a while.
>
> As always, thanks for reading, and thanks for letting me know what you think.

Regulus felt Davies stiffen, but, impressively — he didn't move, didn't make a sound. The only sign of his reaction was the tightness in his fingers, the slight rigidity in his posture, subtle enough to go completely unnoticed by anyone else.

The other captives remained in their own desolate worlds – Regulus didn't look at them long enough to identify thing such as gender or age, but in another assessment of the room he looked long enough to see some slumped against the wall, barely breathing, a body curled on the cold marble floor, whispering silently to himself or any God that would listen to him. Another sat with his back to the bloodstained wall, his head lolling forward unconsciously.

Regulus swallowed the lump in his throat and forced his voice to remain steady. "If you know who I am, twitch your finger twice."

A flicker of movement. Two deliberate twitches.

He knew. He recognised his voice.

Regulus felt stronger than ever – he had come so far; he had managed to steal an invisibility cloak straight from James Potter's bedroom *and* had managed to break into Bellatrix's heavily warded basement. And now, he was standing here, facing the final stretch of his reckless, suicidal plan; he had come so far already, and, truth to be told, there was no returning anymore. He had now truly gone beyond the point of return.

He would have to give it all, all he had, every last ounce of skill and cunning he could possibly muster and try to get out of this alive.

These were the cards that he'd been dealt. This was the boat he'd embarked.

If he went down, he'd rather do it trying to see this through than be swallowed whole by fear.

"Good," Regulus murmured, his voice so low it was barely a breath. Sure, he'd cast a Muffliato, but instinct dictated him to be cautious anyway. "I am under an Invisibility Cloak. In a few seconds, I'm going to throw it over you. We'll be invisible and inaudible. The moment you disappear, they'll know. They'll come looking for you. So we move fast. We don't stop. We are – very simply – just going to walk out of here the second that door opens."

He paused, letting it sink in.

"No matter what happens, no matter what we encounter — do not take off the cloak. Am I understood?"

Another double twitch of Davies's fingers.

Regulus exhaled slowly. "Alright. Eyes on the door. The second it opens, we go. Understood?"

Again, two quick twitches.

Regulus braced himself. His pulse pounded against his ribs, his palms damp with sweat, but his hands remained surprisingly steady.

"On the count of three," he whispered. "One… two… three."

With a swift, fluid motion, he flung the cloak over them both.

The world shifted.

For a second, neither of them moved. Their eyes locked; Davies's dull, hollow gaze suddenly sharpened, flickering with recognition and resolution, as if coming back to life.

Regulus gave a single, sharp nod before his gaze snapped to the door.

The muffled, eerie silence of the Muffliato was still there, but Regulus didn't trust anything at this point anymore – he recast the spell just to be sure.

Then, cautiously, carefully, they began to move.

Regulus kept his steps precise, calculated, forcing himself not to look at the others in the basement, forcing him to pretend it was just him and Davies there. He focused on the path to the door, the piece of wood that stood between them and freedom.

They were only a few feet away when—

Shouting.

Voices, sharp and angry, rang through the basement. Although he had anticipated it, knew they'd be on top of them the moment he'd throw the cloak over Davies, a jolt of panic shot through Regulus's chest.

Then—

BAM.

The door flew open, slamming against the wall.

Standing in the doorway were both the Lestrange brothers.

Rodolphus let out a slow, condescending chuckle, his eyes sweeping over the room. His voice was thick with mockery. "There's no bloody way the bloke just vanished into thin air."

Rabastan, still lingering in the doorway, scowled. "I saw it." His voice betrayed he was clearly frustrated with his elder brother. "I'm a hundred percent sure. The control system showed he was right there — and then he wasn't."

They stepped inside, their sharp gazes sweeping over the dimly lit basement, scanning the captives, the bloodstained walls, the empty space where Davies had been moments ago.

Regulus's pulse thundered, but he didn't hesitate. He gave Davies a sharp nod under the cloak.

Now. Move.

They slid toward the door, as silent as shadows, but it was a tight fit — too tight. Davies was a massive bloke, all broad shoulders and sheer muscle, so the cloak barely covered them both. Regulus swallowed down the irritation — just another reason to hate his stupid, oversized frame — and focused on maneuvering them through the narrow gap.

The moment they slipped into the corridor, cold relief washed over

him like ice water. They'd made it.

"We're going to the Entrance Hall," he breathed. "Stay close. We cannot be seen. It'll only be a matter of time before she hears about this."

They walked away from the basement, the argument between the Lestranges brothers behind them escalating.

"I don't get it," Rabastan snapped. "Why was he here anyway? Who did he belong to? I recognise him — Hogwarts."

"Shut up," Rodolphus snarled. "It's none of your business." His voice darkened with rage. "He cannot be gone."

"I'm telling you, he must've Apparated—"

"You absolute moron," Rodolphus cut in, his voice dripping with disdain. "You don't think the wards block Apparition? How the fuck did you graduate?"

"Oh, don't take the stress of your wife finding out on *me*."

Their voices echoed after them, but Regulus quickly blocked them out – they had one task only. Make it to the Entrance Hall, walk out of the house. They had made it so far already.

The hallway was dark and still, the air thin and cold – it wasn't surprising, it wasn't new, as Regulus had stepped inside the house multiple times before, but it felt more overwhelming than ever. Each step they took up the narrow staircase to the ground level felt like a torturous lifetime.

Then — at the top — they were met with a problem.

A door.

Shit.

They couldn't move through it without opening it — and opening it would give them away. Would give away that they were still in the house *and* where they were.

Regulus barely had time to think before salvation arrived, though in a terrifying way.

The door swung open on its own – or no, not on it's own –

Bellatrix.

She stormed in, her black robes billowing behind her like smoke. "*What* is going on?"

Regulus had no choice but to shove himself and Davies back, pressing against the stone wall. The cloak barely shielded them, and suddenly, Regulus was crushed against Davies — every inch of them forced together, locked in place.

Davies tensed, but he didn't make a sound.

Regulus barely dared to breathe.

Bellatrix swept past them, her heels clicking against the cold stone as she all but flew down the stairs.

Regulus silently begged — to all the Muggle and Magical Gods he could think of at that moment – to leave the door open.

Please, please – leave it open.

And then — yes.

The door remained ajar. *Yes.*

Regulus looked at Davies.

Go. Now.

He pulled Davies forward, slipping soundlessly into the Entrance Hall.

Oh, it was working – they just had to make it to the door. Almost there. Oh, *please* , let it work.

Regulus leaned in. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Almost there. We slip out of the house — it's not far to the Apparition point past the gate."

Davies exhaled, barely above a whisper. "You know this house well."

Regulus couldn't suppress a dark smile. "Yes, well – this is my cousin's home."

Davies swallowed hard, and Regulus knew that the thought of having Bellatrix Lestrange as a cousin must have sent a chill down his spine.

“Almost there, Davies,” Regulus whispered. “Almost there.”

And then—

Bellatrix.

She was suddenly right next to them.

They froze.

A sharp gasp nearly tore from Regulus’s throat, but he bit it down, forcing his breath to silence. Yes, they were silenced, but there wasn’t a rational thought left in his mind as his cousin came way too close for his liking. His heart pounded against his ribs, loud enough that he was sure she could hear it with her predatory ears.

Bellatrix’s voice sliced through the air, sharp and commanding.

“Lock the doors! No one gets out! Lock the fireplaces!”

Panic clawed at Regulus’s throat. No. No, no, *no* —

Bellatrix took a step forward. And then, then, all of a sudden — she paused.

Her gaze flicked toward the empty space where they stood.

Right at them.

Regulus’s lungs locked.

No. She couldn’t see them. The cloak was perfect — it had to be. Yet, her stare was sharp, piercing, calculating…

She took another step closer.

Regulus’s blood turned to ice.

They were still solid. If she reached out — if she so much as brushed against them — she’d feel them. But neither of them dared to move; if they shifted, if so much as a foot slipped free of the cloak, it was over. Finite.

Seconds stretched into eternity.

Then — suddenly — she turned and strode away.

Regulus could hardly breathe.

Davies let out a shuddering exhale, gazing at Bellatrix leaving the Hall. "*Fuck*. What do we do now? We can't get out."

Regulus's mind raced.

They could wait it out, stay put. Eventually, the search would die down. They wouldn't be looking forever…

Still, it was a risk. If Regulus was missing for too long – if he didn't show up at the inauguration tomorrow — someone would notice. It'd be suspicious.

They *had* to move. Had to get out.

But how?

The doors were sealed, the fireplaces blocked.

Except—

Bellatrix's private fireplace.

She wouldn't have sealed that one.

No. She'd never close off her own escape route. The fireplace in her bedroom — it had to still be open. It was their last hope, their rescue.

It came with one enormous, terrifying problem, though. If anyone so much as suspected that Davies had escaped through Bellatrix's personal fireplace, they'd know.

They'd know he'd had help from the inside.

And Bellatrix? She would tear the world apart to find out who.

Regulus's stomach twisted. *Fuck*.

Well – those worries were for later.

"Let's go," Regulus pressed, his voice barely above a whisper. "Second floor. Quickly — up the stairs."

They moved — fast but careful, balancing the need to be quick and silent with every step.

It was impossibly difficult. They had to move together, their bodies forced to touch in many ways that would have, in literally any other circumstance, completely made him uncomfortable, but well – the fear, the adrenaline came as a blessing in this particular situation.

The house was silent, the atmosphere thick with something dark and ominous. The corridors stretched, long and empty, the marble beneath them cold under Regulus's socks.

Just keep moving.

They reached the bedroom door. Regulus's fingers curled around the handle, twisting it just enough to slip inside.

They were in.

Regulus barely exhaled before—

Bellatrix's voice.

From somewhere down the hall, sharp and impatient. "I'm going to get it. Stay there."

Panic lashed through him. Fuck — she was coming here.

He spun toward Davies, his eyes the size of Quaffles. "Quick. Quick — let's go."

No hesitation. No second-guessing. This was it.

Regulus spat out the address, voice low and urgent — because without it, Davies couldn't get there – and then lunged forward, snatching up the Floo powder. He tossed it in with a swift motion, gesturing for Davies to go first.

With a flash of green flame, he was gone. Regulus didn't wait, didn't even breathe while he threw himself into the fire too.

And then—

Yes.

Regulus staggered forward, breathless—

Back in Black Manor.

It had worked.

*****

The air in the Black Manor drawing room was one of utter disbelief and shock. Regulus and Davies collapsed onto the sofas, sitting across from each other in stunned silence.

Regulus let his head fall back against the cushion, eyes fixed on the ornate ceiling as he tried to process everything that had just happened. Every moment of the day crashed down on him — the fear, the desperation, the impossibility of what they had just done. Meanwhile, Davies doubled over, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking violently. Regulus didn't know whether it was out of shock or whether he was crying, but decided in any case to continue staring blankly upward, giving Davies the room to compose himself.

He let out a shaky breath, rubbing his face in complete shock as the realisation settled deep in his bones. He was *there*, in the drawing room, with Davies… It had *worked*. He had done it. He had managed to get Davies out of the claws of Bellatrix – alive. The impossible… had been possible…

For days, every breath, every move, every thought had been dedicated to this. He had risked everything — and somehow, against all odds, he had pulled it off.

A low, disbelieving laugh almost bubbled up, but he was interrupted by Davies cursing.

"*Fuck*."

Davies's voice was hoarse, raw, barely more than a breath. He scrubbed his hands down his face as if trying to wake himself from a nightmare.

"They – they were going to kill me."

Regulus met his eyes. They were wide, haunted, full of terror.

He didn't answer.

Davies inhaled sharply, as if something new had just occurred to him. "Oh." His voice dropped lower, still tinged with panic. "They're going to kill them – all of them."

Regulus held his gaze and stayed silent.

“The things… the things they did….” Davies’s voice cracked, barely a whisper now. “Oh — the woman—”

Regulus let his head fall back again, his mind too full with the fog of adrenaline to formulate a coherent thought or sentence. He knew he’d have to get Davies out of there quickly, but he needed a minute or two to collect himself.

Looking at Davies, who was so pale he actually looked like a ghost, made Regulus realise the Ravenclaw might need more than a minute or two.

“There was a woman,” Davies whispered, his voice trembling. “They… they raped her.”

Regulus’s head snapped back to him. “What?” His voice was quiet, but sharp.

Davies swallowed hard, his skin pale as death. “They — oh, they raped her. Or… she made him rape her. She made him do it, over and over and over again—”

The words barely left his lips before he lurched forward, heaving onto the carpet.

Regulus sat motionless as Davies vomited again and again, shuddering, gasping.

He understood. He understood better than anyone how certain things sank into the body, how it curdled in the gut before the mind could even try to decipher it.

“Sorry — I —” Another violent retch interrupted the apology.

Regulus shook his head, barely hearing him. Instead, he let himself fall back against the sofa, staring at the ceiling again, giving Davies space to purge whatever was left inside him.

When it was over, Regulus flicked his wand, murmuring a quick Scourgify to clean the mess before calling for Whiskerley to bring some water.

Davies took a few shallow sips, his hands still shaking slightly around the glass. He swallowed hard. “Your cousin… she made him rape her.” His voice was steadier now, but still laced with horror. “One of the blokes that opened the door.”

That caught Regulus's interest. His brows furrowed.

"Lestrange's brother," Davies clarified.

Regulus exhaled slowly. "He's her husband."

Davies blinked. Confusion flickered across his face. "She made her husband rape her?"

Regulus sighed as the realisation settled. From the look of growing disgust on Davies's face, he was piecing it together too.

The woman.

A mistress. A lover of Rodolphus's, and now paying the hightest price for it.

"God." Davies's breath hitched. His voice was barely audible. "Well, it explains why he didn't seem particularly… eager to do it."

Regulus's stomach turned violently.

Luckily, Davies steered the conversation elsewhere.

"What would've happened to you?" he asked. His voice was quieter now. "If they'd found out?"

Regulus let out a dark laugh. "She'd put me in that basement too."

A heavy silence stretched between them.

Regulus thought about it – what Bellatrix would do, what he'd find her capable of doing if he had been caught. Her rage, her sadism, her need for blood would have known no limits.

"But I think I'd get a harsher treatment than you, even," he added. His lips curled slightly, but there was no humour in it, only bitterness.

He exhaled deeply, still wrapping his head around the fact that they had made it. That they were alive.

Davies's gaze flickered around the room, taking in the dark wooden panels, the towering bookshelves, the flickering light of the chandeliers.

"You live here?" he asked after a moment.

Regulus nodded.

Davies hesitated. “With your parents?”

Regulus snorted — oh, if Davies thought that Regulus had rescued him from Bellatrix’s basement to take him to his *parents’* house, he still had a few things to learn about their world.

He decided not to elaborate on it.

“No,” he nodded, a bit stiffly. “I live alone.”

Davies nodded absently, still taking in the room. His gaze drifted over the furniture, the piano, the carpets – before it suddenly froze on something.

A cloak, draped carelessly over the back of a chair. A very feminine cloak, one that Davies would definitely recognise.

And by the way Davies’s eyes lingered on it, Regulus knew he did.

Their gazes met.

Instantly, the room felt heavier.

“I don’t get it,” Davies finally said. His voice was quiet, rough. “Why save me? Why risk it all — risk getting killed — to save me?” He hesitated, his fingers tightening slightly around the armrest. “I — I thought you loved her.”

Regulus arched a brow. God, how *daft* could the bloke be? Regulus suppressed the urge to let out a sharp bitter laugh.

“I do.” Regulus’s voice was unreadable, emotionless, somewhat matter-of-fact. He didn’t look away from Davies as he spoke. “Why do you think I risked it all?”

A flicker of confusion crossed Davies’s face. “Yes… That makes no sense to me at all.”

Regulus shrugged. “Doesn’t have to.”

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes after which Regulus snapped back to reality. He could *not* have Davies in his drawing room minutes after he’d fled Bellatrix’s house. Sure — he had closed off the floo from anyone but Isa, but Merlin knew what Bellatrix would try in her desperation to recover one of her captives.

“You have to go to the Potters,” Regulus said abruptly.

Davies looked up, still dazed, still trying to process everything.

“He – Isa’s father – he won’t stop looking for you,” Regulus explained, voice sharp, urgent. “Not until the day that he dies. The Potters… they’re in Dumbledore’s circle. There’s no safer place for you than there.”

Davies absorbed the words before nodding, straightening slightly.

“Go to the Potters. Let them patch you up, take care of security — make sure you’re safe.”

Another nod. Then Davies pushed himself off the couch.

Regulus’s gaze dropped to the invisibility cloak, lying discarded on the floor — so undignified, so irreverent, as if it hadn’t just saved their bloody lives.

He bent down and picked it up. “The cloak belongs to Potter.” His voice was low, careful. “You have to return it — but he can’t know we had it, understand? When you get the chance, put it in his bedroom. Hide it. Somewhere under his bed, maybe – so he’ll think he just… didn’t look properly.”

Davies stared at him, still visibly confused as he was still trying to piece things together.

Regulus tried to ignore his growing frustration at the lingering confusion in Davies’s eyes as they moved toward the fireplace.

Regulus sighed deeply. “Potter’s bedroom is the third door to the right on the first floor—”

His words died in his throat.

A pause.

Their gazes locked.

Regulus saw the exact moment Davies registered it.

A slow tilt of the head, a flicker of realisation. “Why do you know where his bedroom is?”

Regulus flinched, too overwhelmed to have an answer ready. The

silence stretched too long, the hesitation too evident.

Davies's brows lifted. "No way." Then, a breathless laugh of disbelief. "*No fucking way*. You and *James Potter*?"

Regulus didn't answer, but instead pressed the cloak into Davies's hands.

Their eyes met again.

Davies exhaled sharply, still staring at him like he was seeing a puzzle piece snap into place that he hadn't even realised was missing. His expression was a mixture of shock and pity.

"Oh—" Davies murmured, still reeling. "That… that must be complicated."

Regulus swallowed, not in the slightest eager to discuss the complexity of what played between him and Potter with Isa's lover.

"How are you at Occlumency?" Regulus asked brusquely.

Davies blinked, thrown by the sudden shift. "Utterly rubbish at it," he admitted, then huffed a short, humourless laugh. "Dora's tried it on me a few times."

Regulus flinched.

Of course. *Of course,* the bloke would be terrible at Occlumency.

Meaning if he ever ended up in the wrong hands, it would mean the end of Regulus. Probably of Potter, too, considering what Davies had just pieced together.

Regulus swallowed hard, his voice low, urgent. "Promise me."

Davies tensed.

Regulus continued. "*Promise* me that you won't tell anyone I got you out of that basement."

Davies hesitated, then nodded.

Regulus stepped closer, his voice almost a hiss. "No one can know." His fingers curled into fists. "Not even Potter or his parents – no one. My life depends on it." He inhaled sharply. "And Isa — she can't know either. She can't even know you were captured. Her father will turn to

her first."

Another, more solemn nod.

Regulus exhaled, then gave Davies Potter's address before he stepped into the fireplace, the cloak hidden under his filthy shirt.

Just before he left, Davies met his gaze one last time.

"I won't tell anyone. About anything. I promise."

Something in his eyes made Regulus believe him.

A beat.

Then, quieter— "And, Black — thank you."

Regulus nodded.

Davies hesitated once more before adding, "And… take care of her, alright?"

Regulus's throat felt tight. "I will."

With a rush of green flames, Davies was gone.

*****

In some very dark, sick, ironic twist, all the happenings related to freeing Davies from Bellatrix's basement had come with an advantage — it had kept Regulus's mind off the inauguration.

Otherwise, he would have probably spent days and nights tossing and turning, thinking, contemplating, philosophising, debating, explaining, justifying.

Not that he had managed to escape it entirely, though.

No — now that Davies was safe in the hands of the Potters and the inauguration was less than twenty hours away, it all came crashing down at once; the nerves, the dread, the nausea.

Combined with his mind still replaying the events of the night before — over and over, like a terrorising dream — Regulus had barely slept, so by the time he flooed over to Bellatrix's the next day, he was reduced to a bundle of nerves and exhaustion.

He tried not to think about it — the way he had walked through this very Entrance Hall the night before, up these very stairs, with his heart pounding in his throat, barely daring to breathe. Afraid. So fucking afraid.

And now he was afraid, too – afraid that Bellatrix would see it on his face.

Naturally, no one had informed him about what had happened the previous night — no one knew he had been part of it and he wasn't supposed to know about Davies at all; he had found out about him by that particular roll of parchment, not intended for his eyes, deliberately or accidently steered in his direction by Cissy.

He still didn't know, had no idea if she had meant for him to see it, if she had done it on purpose and for what reason.

But as he met her now, just outside the drawing room, she didn't say anything — didn't look at him in any way that suggested she knew what he'd been involved in.

As always she pulled him into a hug, but Regulus saw the nervousness through the warmth of her smile. Regulus forced a smile in return when he realised that the drawing room was empty.

His stomach curled uneasily.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

Cissy turned, reaching for a cloak from inside the room. She draped it over his shoulders – the fabric was black and heavy.

Then she guided him away, back toward the staircase. "It will take place downstairs," she explained. "In the basement."

Regulus's throat closed instantly.

The basement.

His pulse quickened. His stomach flipped violently. He fought to keep his expression neutral – the bloody basement. *Fuck*.

"It — it will?"

Cissy nodded.

They began to walk the same path as the previous night – when he

had been under the cloak with Davies, desperate, shaking, heart slamming against his ribs.

He tried not to think about it – about the fear, the pounding of his heart, the utter horror in Davies's eyes.

Cissy stopped when they reached the door to the basement stairs.

"This is where I go," she said softly.

Regulus turned to her.

Her hand hovered just slightly, like she wanted to reach for him again, but didn't. "You'll be great, Reg. Think about everything we discussed — it… it's necessary. Think about all the things he's done. You're helping the world, Reg, you're making it better."

Regulus swallowed hard and managed to nod. He didn't quite meet her eyes.

Then, before he could hesitate, before he could freeze, he stepped through the door and began the descent. The descent down the very same stairs Bellatrix had almost run into them on the night before.

His breath felt trapped in his ribs as he walked, his pace subconsciously slowing down with every step he took.

By the time he reached the door, his fingers were ice and his heart pounded against his ribs so hard it hurt.

He stepped inside.

They were all waiting. Draped in identical cloaks, their hoods drawn, the pointed tips stark and ominous, like the blade of a dagger.

The Dark Lord lifted his head, his voice soft, welcoming – inviting.

Regulus took a breath, trying to steady himself, to distract him from the legs feeling like jelly beneath him, the way his heart slammed in his chest.

Then, slowly, with trembling fingers, he lifted the hood—

—and stepped inside.

*****

The inauguration had gone beyond an earthly understanding of horror – it transcended fear, bled into complete, utter terror burrowing into the very marrow of Regulus's bones.

It was unfathomable how such a life-altering notion could have taken place in such a short amount of time. Sure, Regulus had lost all sense and meaning of time in that room, but he knew, rationally, that the ritual hadn't needed to last long. It could have been over in less than half an hour if they had simply done their duty and left.

Naturally, that didn't quite happen – the ritual did, after all, include Bellatrix among others, who clearly saw her role that evening as her magnum opus, the moment suprême of her very life, the night she had been born for. She stood practically vibrating at the edge of the circle, her lips parted slightly in uncontained, sadistic exhilaration.

The door shut behind him with an ominous click. The basement looked larger than it had been the night before, but now in complete and utter darkness, except for the flickering of red flames in the centre of the room, the only source of light. With the thirteen hooded figures encircling the fire, their shadows cast sinister silhouettes against the stone walls.

The flames did not give off heat, though – the air felt cold, frigid, and Regulus shivered. He avoided looking at anyone, kept his gaze pointedly on the eerie fire, afraid of what he'd see in the others' eyes.

The ground around the flames was marked with ancient, cryptic symbols, glowing faintly, shifting underfoot like living things. Regulus recognised nothing from his Runes studies, making him realise that the magic he would encounter that evening would be unlike anything he'd seen ever before, probably beyond anything he could comprehend.

He had no idea what to expect — no one had told him what the ritual entailed, what would happen, how it would evolve. He quickly took a glance around the circle. Bellatrix's eyes, unsurprisingly, gleamed, her expression more feverish than he'd ever seen before, her eyes twinkling with danger and something aroused. It made Regulus's stomach churn instantly. Mr. Nott stood beside her, resolute but emotionless. Lucius stood at the other side of the circle, his gaze steady and serious. Regulus felt an unexpected but welcome relief when he caught Dolohov and the younger Lestrange shifting uncomfortably, a glint of fear in their eyes – at least he wasn't alone in this, then.

At the head of the circle stood the Dark Lord himself, and Regulus found himself directly in front of him.

A shudder ran over his spine.

Silence. Complete, utter silence.

The only thing Regulus could hear was the violent hammering of his own pulse, echoing in his skull. His breath was short, shallow and uneven. He kept his gaze down, afraid to look at Bellatrix and see the danger in her eyes, although he could actually feel her exhilaration radiating from her in waves across the room.

Then, all of a sudden, he heard whispers. Low, indecipherable whispers. The sound, the sensation crawled beneath his skin, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. He didn't recognise the language.

Then, the Dark Lord raised his wand.

"Advenite, sacrificia causae."

The flames surged as if coming alive, and then… Regulus jolted as a shape materialised within the fire.

A man.

Without a doubt one of the captives, although Regulus had no idea to whom he belonged. The man's eyes were rolling wildly, his chest rising and falling in frantic gasps. The whites of his eyes were visible in the flickering glow, stretched wide in uncomprehending horror. He thrashed, but he was held in place by something invisible. When his mouth opened to scream, there came no sound, nothing but silence leaving his lips.

Then, all of a sudden, his clothes vanished, leaving him completely naked in the flames, and then–

Then the screams came.

Loud, ragged, wretched. Pleading and praying.

The sound went straight through Regulus's soul. He clenched his jaw as bile rose in his throat.

He forced himself to breathe, forced himself to stand still. His hands clenched at his sides, nails digging into his palms so hard he was sure they were bleeding.

All of a sudden, black flames appeared, circling them, enclosing them. Another surge of fire appeared between the captive and… Travers.

So he belonged to him.

Travers stepped forward. He looked emotionless, silent as he lifted his wand and a flash of green light erupted from it. He didn't even have to say the words.

Regulus saw it in slow motion — the way the man's body jerked, how his face froze in an expression of absolute terror. And he fell – but before he touched the ground, he turned to smoke. Black, thick, curling smoke, slithering like a snake between the Dark Lord and Travers. The connection forged, then—

Regulus jolted in surprise as Travers gasped, his arm jerking violently. His left forearms, bare and visible for everyone, hissed as if he were branded. The scent of scorched flesh filled the air, making Regulus realise that he *was* actually being branded.

Green and black ink bled beneath his skin, darkening, shifting.

The Mark was there.

Regulus was so enthralled by the sight of the Mark on Travers's arm that it went completely past him that another captive had appeared in the flames. This time, it was a woman, and again, Regulus had no clue who she was or whom she belonged to. A new ring of black flames flared to life, dividing her from Lucius. Regulus barely blinked.

The motions repeated. Lucius stepped forward, his wand raised, casting another flash of green, sending another body folding in on itself, dissolving into black smoke before it could even touch the ground. Branding another Mark, searing into flesh.

Regulus was distantly aware of feeling off — everything was moving too fast and too slow at the same time. Nothing truly registered. Everything felt more real, more raw than ever before, while, at the same time, nothing was really *there* , nothing really *existed* . Both his mind and body completely shut down. He wasn't thinking about who the woman had been to Lucius, or what she had meant – or if she had meant anything at all.

The numbness continued.

Another captive appeared. A man. This time, Dolohov moved forward.

His *Avada Kedavra* was spoken rather than silent, but the effect was the same; another thud that never landed, another Mark branded.

The younger Lestrange followed. His hand was surprisingly steady as he cast his curse, verbal too. A young woman crumpled. Smoke slithered to the Dark Lord. A hiss of pain. Another Mark.

Somehow, in a way that felt so wrong, so unnatural, Regulus still felt nothing. Felt nothing as all the people died before his eyes, as all the souls left their bodies, connecting the killer with the Dark Lord through black, cold smoke.

Then came Bellatrix.

She raised her wand — naturally, not to kill, but to play. Play with whatever was left of the woman. Regulus didn't think anything of the bruises, the atrocities evident on her body, or her trembling limbs, her eyes pleading and full of horror as she glanced at Rodolphus.

She made him rape her. She made him do it, over and over and over again…

It should have made him react. Should have made him sick – but there was nothing. No horror. No disgust. Not even rage.

He was completely muted.

He barely registered Mr. Nott's calling out Bellatrix to end it, his voice bored and uninterested, saying he still liked to enjoy dinner with his wife later that night. He didn't register how the captive writhed, her screams raw. He simply watched, unfeeling, as she twisted, convulsed, and then fell, too.

He had slipped too far inside himself, to that place, for away in his soul, that no one could touch, that he'd turn to when he was young, when he had felt hands on places they shouldn't be, lips brushing skin it shouldn't brush and words whispered into his ears he should not have understood.

He'd turned to that one place in himself.

Until – until *he* appeared.

Regulus's vision narrowed, the entire room crushing in on him, sensing everything, seeing everything in unparalleled hyperfocus.

The man was middle-aged, dark-haired. His features stretched in pure horror as his mouth opened and closed, forming silent, disparate pleas, his body shuddering against the magic holding him in the cold flames.

Regulus took a step forward, staring into the man's face. His heart slammed against his ribs. It felt as if the air had been sucked from the room, leaving him choking.

Baran Demir.

He knew the name. He knew what the man had done. What he had taken from so many children. What he had taken from them, like what had been taken from Regulus.

Regulus glanced at the others in the circle. He caught Lucius's gaze – steady, giving him the faintest, subtlest nod of silent approval. His stomach twisted. Mr. Nott and Thorne were watching him closely, contemplative, calculating.

He could see their wonder in their eyes – could he do it? The sixteen-year-old school boy? Was he strong enough? Could he cast an Unforgivable?

Could he *kill*?

Then he looked at Bellatrix. The corner of her mouth twitched, her lips curling in wicked amusement, the promise of a challenge glinting in her dark eyes – challenging him.

Go on, little prince. Let's see what you're made of.

Regulus flinched.

Don't think – don't hesitate. He forced himself to go to that familiar place, that place he'd always gone to.

Oh, you're so wonderful.

The words cut through his mind like a knife.

You made me like this. You — you're so beautiful. I couldn't help myself. Such a wonderful boy…

Bile. Hate. Shame.

Regulus swallowed hard, pushing it all down. His breath was sharp,

unsteady and he closed his eyes for the briefest second to compose himself.

He exhaled.

His grip on his wand tightened. He lifted his arm, slow, deliberate.

Baran Demir's eyes locked onto his. The raw terror in them — the knowledge of what was coming, the frantic, silent begging — burned itself into Regulus's mind as permanently as the Mark would do on his body.

The man was pleading. Not me. Please. *Please*. His lips formed the words, though no sound came. His body trembled, the helpless shudder of prey before the inevitable strike.

Regulus flicked his wand. He didn't even need to say the words out loud. A flick of his wand was enough.

A flash of green.

Baran Demir was dead before he hit the ground.

Before he could even fall, he was gone. Smoke curling upward, slithering like a dark serpent, reaching, twisting, coiling towards Regulus.

And then he felt it — pain.

Surprising and uncomfortable, but manageable pain.

Regulus gasped quietly as fire ignited beneath his skin, his left arm jerking violently. The scent of scorched flesh hit him immediately.

The Mark.

It was there.

*****

The numbness didn't last.

When he stepped out of the fireplace of Black Manor, it crashed into him all at once. The pleading, the smell – the smell he hadn't known before; of despair, thick and suffocating. The smell of death, curling around him like rot, clinging to his skin.

The terror in their eyes. The way the man had looked at him – pleading, wordless. The moment the light left him. And the woman – Bellatrix's captive. Her body, covered in bruises and wounds in the sick, twisted evidence of all she had suffered.

And then — Davies's voice, like a whisper in his ear.

"She made him rape her. She made him do it, over and over and over again…"

And how, even after all the horrors he had endured, she had still begged for mercy rather than welcome death.

His stomach lurched. The room was spinning.

He barely registered that Isa was there, even though he hadn't seen her for days – barely saw her sitting in the same spot Davies had sat the night before. His legs gave out beneath him. He staggered forward, hands shaking, body convulsing—

And then he collapsed at her feet, bent over her lap—

And vomited.

Spilled everything onto the carpet, exactly where Davies had the night before.

"Reg—" Isa gasped, startled, her hands immediately in his hair, holding it back. "Reg, *what* — what happened? Are you—?"

Her voice blurred in his ears.

He could still *see* them.

The eyes.

His eyes, but, somehow, mostly *hers*.

The woman's empty, shattered gaze burned into him.

He swallowed hard, forced himself upright. His hands shook violently as he locked gazes with Isa – his eyes filled with terror – and then dropped his head back into the sofa.

It was completely silent. The only sound came from Regulus's heart beating in his chest.

“I—” His voice was hoarse, barely audible. “I killed someone.”

Isa’s lips parted, but no words came out.

Regulus looked at her again, his voice laced with disbelief, as if he was still coming to terms with it.

“I –” his breathed hitched. “I *killed* someone.”

Isa’s eyes flickered with something — confusion, hesitation — but she stayed silent. Cautious. Waiting for Regulus to unfold himself, to untangle whatever this was.

Regulus’s head fell back against the sofa, the woman’s eyes still there, still staring.

“I—” His voice cracked. “I saw so many… *people* die. So many *souls* — leaving their bodies.”

Isa remained quiet.

Regulus turned his head toward her. His fingers curled into fists.

“I had to do it, Ies,” he whispered. His voice was low, unsteady. “He — he *hurt* them. He — he raped them. Like … like he did to me. ”

Isa’s eyes widened.

Regulus let out a raw, desperate breath. “I had to do it. It was — I had to do it, Ies…”

Isa still didn’t say anything – didn’t give Regulus the reassurance, the agreement he was looking for. The urgency in him turned into something jagged.

“You understand, don’t you, Ies?” His hands twitched where they rested. “You understand?”

Isa swallowed. She opened her mouth — and closed it. Still, she said nothing.

His breath quickened. His pulse thundered in his ears. He *needed* her to say it.

“You *understand*, right, Ies?” His voice wavered, rising. “You *have to understand, Ies — YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND! ”*

Isa flinched, startled. Then she jumped up.

“Yes,” she said quickly, nodding fervently. “Yes, I get it, Reg. He — he did what he did to you. He… he raped them, right?”

Her voice was soft, careful. It was exactly what he needed.

Regulus let out a deep, shuddering breath. His body sagged as he nodded. “Yes — yes… he raped them… *he raped them*… I had to do it.”

Silence.

Then Isa exhaled, steadying herself. Gently, cautiously, she reached out, curled her fingers around his hands, coaxing him to stand.

“C’mon, Reg,” she whispered, her eyes filled with a mixture of concern and shock. “Let’s just… sleep for now, alright? Let’s get you upstairs.”

Regulus didn’t remember much after that.

Didn’t remember how she guided him from the drawing room, how she walked him to his bedroom with slow, deliberate steps.

Didn’t remember how her hands worked delicately – first unfastening his robes, slipping them from his shoulders, then peeling away the layers beneath, one by one. His shirt. His undershirt. His belt, then his trousers.

Didn’t remember how, in any other moment, he would have felt something — embarrassment, unease at being so exposed before her. Didn’t remember how he, now, didn’t feel anything at all.

Didn’t remember how her eyes had lingered on the Mark, the questions evident in her eyes.

Didn’t remember how she found one of his shirts and put it on him, how she pulled the duvet over him, tucking him in.

Didn’t remember the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion pressed against his lips.

Didn’t remember how, after a while, she curled up beside him, her arms around him, her fingers stroking through his hair.

Didn’t remember what she whispered — soft, soothing words, spoken

over and over.

Didn’t remember how he drifted off, entering that land of nothingness, of complete bliss.

Chapter 27: Of Cookies & Love

Chapter Notes

A longer chapter, very curious about your thoughts!

Mind the warnings. (Explicit) Mature content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a striking reflection of Regulus's life, the most horrible event in his life had set in motion what would become positively the best experience in his entire existence. A strange paradox, a perfect balance – yin and yang. The highest peaks and the lowest valleys, coexisting to form a flat, unbroken plain.

The morning after the inauguration, Regulus woke groggy, as if he'd fallen off his broom mid-flight, crashing hard against the ground at full speed. It wasn't surprising – although he hadn't taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion in a long time, he had enough experience with it to remember its aftereffects; the dull fog in his head, the heavy weight of his limbs.

So, as expected, his head throbbed as he sat up slowly and swung his legs over the side of the bed. In raw, merciless flashes the events of the previous night resurfaced. The inauguration, the bodies, the pleading, the smell of death clinging to his skin. His stomach twisted.

Oh, and Isa – Isa in the drawing room, her hands in his hair, him vomiting at her feet, draped over her lap.

He groaned, the shame curling in his gut – surely none of the others had reacted that way, hadn't been vomiting at the feet of a girl. Just the idea of him losing it like that in front of her made him flinch, shuddering in utter self loathing.

He sighed, his hands trailing down to his hands burying his face as his eyes flickered down to his underarm.

The Mark.

His fingers ghosted over it, tracing the intricate, raised outlines — the shape burned into his skin, as much a part of him as the veins underneath. It stung faintly as he touched it.

It is a binding sigil. A magical brand that fuses a soul piece into the mark itself.

He was so intrigued by its form and the skull, the snake that seemed to slowly move as he gently touched it, that he didn't notice Isa's presence. She had, without a doubt, been standing in that doorway for a while, looking at the sight of Regulus in his t-shirt, completely mesmerised by the tattoo on his arm.

Sirius had always wanted a tattoo – said that it looked tough. Regulus snorted at the realisation that he'd gotten a tattoo before him. Although, truth to be told, Sirius definitely wouldn't want to have this kind.

When he looked up, he jumped slightly in surprise at Isa looking at him, deep in thought.

He froze, his breath catching as their eyes met. A thoughtful silence stretched between them before Isa broke it.

"Whiskerley prepared lunch," she said softly. She gave him a small nod, the barest hint of a smile across her face, before she turned and walked away.

Regulus exhaled, rubbing his face with both hands, before sighing and pushing himself up from the bed.

*****

Isa stayed for the part of the day, but not once raised the topic of what had happened in the drawing room. She eyes the Mark often, her gaze distant and contemplative, but never said a word about it. It was very unlike her; Isa, insatiable when it came to her curiosity, especially regarding the Revolution, not asking a single question, not prying even in the slightest. She never asked who he had killed or how he had done it. She didn't press him about the bodies, about the souls he had seen departing, about the Mark now suddenly on his arm. She seemed to genuinely not want to know.

Regulus couldn't blame her — surely she understood that the truth was ugly, that whatever had left him in that state must have been horrific. Regulus, for his part, was grateful that she seemed afraid to know. He had no desire at all to discuss what had happened, had no desire to share what he had been part of, what her own father had been part of, for that matter. He didn't want to tell her about all the things leading up to it — how he'd sat with Davies in that drawing

room, how the entire night had been the conclusion to so many dark, unfathomable things.

No, he never, ever wanted to talk about these things in his life.

Besides, he knew that Isa wouldn't understand. She was sharp, she was more intelligent than any of his friends, but she wouldn't understand, wouldn't see it the way he did. Wouldn't understand the necessity of sacrifice. Wouldn't understand how years of oppression had pushed them to desperate measures. No, she'd be too emotional, too caught up in the morality of it all. She wouldn't be able to calculate it, to place it alongside the bigger, greater good.

And well, with everything still fresh in his mind, raw in his soul, he much more preferred to bury it, to pack it away and shove it into the furthest corner of his mind, covering it with layers of all the reason and justification he could find. Talking about it with Isa would do the exact opposite, so he was glad — glad that she wanted to navigate around the fat elephant in the room.

He could feel her eyes tracking him, though, quietly assessing his state when she thought he wasn't looking. Knowing it came from a good place he tried not to be annoyed by it, but it was much easier to be irritated than to feel utterly, deeply embarrassed thinking about how he'd behaved the previous night, so he clung onto the irritation and was relieved when she left to help her mother prepare for their departure to Damascus.

The rest of the afternoon, he spent trying to keep his mind occupied, forcing himself into distraction after distraction. He read until the words blurred into meaningless shapes, played the piano until his fingers cramped and stood under an ice-cold shower until he'd lost all sensation in his body and collapsed into his bed although the sun had not even set. He was completely utterly knackered by the weeks of stress and the aftereffects of the Dreamless Sleep Potion of the previous night — so knackered, even, that, despite all the horrors from that basement, sleep came easily.

It was short lived, though. In a cruel turn of events, he had managed to fall asleep easily to be woken by the sound of a very annoying and persistent ticking at the window.

It went on and on and on, pulling him back from the edge of unconsciousness. He groaned, forcing himself to ignore it and just go back to sleep. The ticking, however, continued. He let out an irritated

breath, rolling into his side. Still, it continued. He grabbed the nearest pillow and hurled it at the window, his sleepiness making him forget all sense of direction. The sound, however, only grew louder.

With a frustrated sigh, he shoved back the covers, pushed himself upright, and stalked to the window. He barely had time to open it properly before the owl swooped inside, landing on his desk.

He recognised the owl immediately. His heart stuttered as a flicker of warmth spread through his chest. It was so raw, so overwhelming, that all irritation seemed to evaporate — even when he, again, realised that the stupid owl's name was *Elagabalus*.

Meet me at the bookstore tomorrow, 11 a.m.

God — how was he supposed to sleep *now*?

*****

He knew he shouldn't go. He knew it was the best thing just to ignore it — to ignore the letter, crawl into bed and get on with life. Whatever had been between them had ended for a reason. The two of them — they weren't just incompatible, it was dangerous, too. Merlin knew what Potter did for the Revolution now, especially as Dumbledore was definitely recruiting. And Regulus — well, he had chosen his path. His future had been sealed more than ever with the Mark now etched into his skin. No, truly nothing good would come from him meeting Potter, placing him in front of the forbidden fruit, the drug to an addict, the moth to the flame, the bear to the honey.

Yet, Regulus knew, had an inkling that there was a reason for this meet-up. Potter, after the Ball, had definitely pieced together that Regulus had lied; that it *had* been real for him, what had played out between them. That it had been more real than anything in his entire life. This didn't, however, change the fact that Potter had been disappointed, probably even disgusted, by who Regulus truly was. This didn't just change overnight, so, well — whatever had compelled Potter to reach out now, it had to be important.

At least, that is what Regulus told himself.

So, against all odds, all good sense, Regulus took the Knight Bus to London the next day, draping a summer cloak over his Muggle clothes — a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans that made him rather uncomfortable.

He had known immediately which bookstore Potter meant — there was only one it could be, the one where they had run into each other the previous summer. For a fleeting moment he considered stepping inside to see Marie-Anne, but he dismissed the thought just as quickly. Instead, he lingered on the opposite side of the street, leaning casually against the frontage of some drab little boutique, waiting for Potter to arrive first.

Except — Potter was apparently already there.

Regulus spotted him across the street, mirroring his posture, leaning against the wall of a shop a few yards to the left of the bookstore. His gaze swept over the crowd, searching. Searching for him.

Regulus's throat went dry instantly. His heart slammed against his ribs.

Potter looked — *fuck*, he looked good. The usual mess of dark hair, wild and chaotic. A T-shirt that, like all Muggle clothes, looked unfairly good on his muscled frame, the sleeves snug around his biceps. He had an air of effortlessness that was highly intoxicating, although Regulus knew him well enough to see the anticipation in his eyes.

The street around them was alive; tourists chattering, women balancing shopping bags on their arms, cars honking as they made their way through traffic. It was in the middle of this summer chaos that their gazes locked.

Regulus felt the breath leave his lungs. A flicker of warmth passed through Potter's eyes before a certain shyness surfaced, sending a flutter through his gut. Without meaning to, Regulus's mouth quirked into a small, faint smile.

Potter motioned for Regulus to follow, but didn't move toward the bookstore. Instead, he turned and disappeared into a narrow alley down the street. Regulus pushed off the wall and hesitated only for a second before following.

The alley was thin, just wide enough for two people to stand shoulder to shoulder. The sounds of the street faded into the distance, as if they'd just entered a silent world by rounding that corner.

Regulus kept his distance in the alley, but even from a few paces away, it was obvious that Potter was restless. He paced up and down, running a hand through his already-messy hair, his energy clearly

impossible to contain.

Then he looked up.

Regulus swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry as their gazes locked.

Potter hesitated for only a second before speaking. “You — you saved him.”

The words hit like a hex straight to the chest. *What?*

Regulus stiffened. “What?”

Potter’s nodded, his eyes big with disbelief and something warm. “Davies – you – you saved him.”

Regulus’s eyes widened to the size of Quaffles. Bloody Davies.

He had risked his life for that idiot, and he couldn’t even keep his bloody mouth shut? A groan of frustration escaped him, but irritation quickly gave way to concern.

They couldn’t talk about this. Not here. He was desperate to know what Davies had spilled, what exactly Potter knew, but not in the middle of Muggle London.

Regulus exhaled sharply. “We can’t talk about this, Potter.”

Potter took a step closer. “No, don’t brush me off, I just — I need to —”

“Not here,” Regulus shot sharply.

Potter stilled, hesitating, then gave a small nod. “Alright. Where, then?”

Regulus eyed him carefully. “Do you have your cloak?”

*****

It was, without question, the most reckless and imprudent thing he’d ever done – but Regulus had taken Potter to Black Manor. He told himself that the floo network was closed off, that he wasn’t expecting anyone and that at least it wasn’t in modernist territory, but deep down, he knew all these facts didn’t even factor into the decision.

Every ounce of sensibility and logic vanished just at the sight of

Potter. There was something so magnetic, so magical about him that Regulus just instantly forgot about all the rules, all concerns and, well, his self-preservation. Besides, just glancing at Potter from across the Muggle street had made him feel more alive than he'd felt for weeks, and it was such a refreshing, powerful break from the numbness and dread he'd grown accustomed to, that he wanted to do everything in his might to chase that feeling and hold onto it.

So, that is why Regulus Arcturus Black found himself on the Knight Bus heading back to Black Manor from Muggle London with James Potter hidden under a cloak whispering absolute nonsense in his ear, trying to make him laugh.

And boy, was he succeeding.

Potter had a gift for coming up with the most absurd, outlandish backstories for their fellow passengers, spinning wild stories in an utterly serious tone. The old wizard dozing in the front row was actually a Veela so fed up with her beauty that she'd take Polyjuice Potion every time she stepped into a public place. Another man in the corner who was nervously glancing out of the window was, according to Potter, definitely on his way to an underground illegal race.

But the final straw was the eccentric-looking woman across from them.

Potter leaned in, voice serious and grave. "Dragon smuggler," he whispered.

Now, Regulus was already biting back laughter, but when the woman shifted in her seat and — of all things — a small egg rolled out from under her arm, he completely lost it. A loud, uncontrollable laugh burst from him, drawing the attention of every single passenger. They all turned to stare, as if *he* were the mad one — not the supposed dragon smuggler with an actual, albeit very tiny, egg.

And though it felt refreshing to laugh that hard, the most special thing about it was the warmth of Potter shaking with silent laughter behind him, his breath brushing against Regulus's ear.

He had managed to compose himself more or less by the time they arrived at Black Manor, although he the faintest trace of a smile still lingered on his lips.

"Stay under the Cloak until I say," Regulus said softly as they walked to the iron-wrought gate.

Part of the new security measures was that not just anyone walk onto the premises anymore; you had to tap the gate and say the password before they opened.

“Augustus,” Regulus said softly as he tapped the iron bar.

Potter, still invisible, made a confused noise. “Augustus?”

“Yes, you know, the Roman emperor,” Regulus replied distractedly, watching the gate swinging open.

“Oh,” Potter said. A pause. Then, sheepishly, he added: “Yeah, I don’t really know much about Roman emperors.”

Regulus snorted. “Yeah, I figured.”

“*How*?”

Regulus laughed. “You named your owl *Elagabalus*, Potter — that’s really saying enough.”

There was an indignant huff from beneath the Cloak. “It’s a nice name, alright?”

Regulus only shook his head, still smirking. Then he coughed awkwardly, looking away in an attempt to come across as nonchalant.

“Stay under the Cloak, but — take my hand. You won’t be able to enter otherwise.”

Potter didn’t say anything and for a second, nothing happened. Then, barely perceptible, Regulus felt the brush of his fingers against his own. A heartbeat later, Potter’s hand slid into his.

Regulus flinched. The warmth of Potter’s hand, the familiarity of it, sent a fire racing through him so suddenly, so overwhelmingly, that he had to force himself to keep a straight face and walk forward as if it hadn’t affected him at all.

They stepped past the threshold, the magic of the wards humming softly around them.

Regulus let go first. He could still feel the heat of Potter’s skin on his own as they moved deeper onto the grounds.

Although he technically didn’t know because he couldn’t see him, Regulus knew that Potter was taking in his surroundings — the grass,

the flowers, the lake, the dense forest at the edges of the estate.

“Some house you’ve got, Black.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Potter.”

But he couldn’t completely suppress the twitching of his lips.

*****

Regulus left Potter waiting under the Cloak on the premises while he took every precautionary measure in the house to hide the presence of James Potter to the outside world; he froze the portraits, he cast a *Homenum Revelio* in every room just to make sure they were actually empty, and, after he’d instructed Whiskerley to set some food and drinks out near the lake, he ordered her to Seacliff Hall for the remainder of the day.

He also tried the concealment spell that Cissy had taught him to hide the Mark on his arm and was relieved that it worked — the only sign of its existence was a faint pressure on the place of the ink. He made a mental note to reapply the spell every six hours or so.

Now, although he still tried to convince himself of the fact that he had only invited Potter to Black Manor to get to the bottom of the information that Davies had shared about his rescue, he realised that the sight of a blanket with food near the lake did sort of give off another idea. Still, when he had given Potter green light, and he had pulled off the Cloak with a way too knowing and smug smile, Regulus had only shot him a very fierce look, not even trying to justify himself. He did, though, dive into the topic of Nathaniel Davies straight away.

They sat by the lake, silence stretching between them as they each took a sip of Butterbeer. Potter, of course, broke the silence first.

“Such a Beauxbatons vibe,” he joked, pointing at the picnic and the lake.

Regulus didn’t dignify this with a retort.

“Who knows?” he asked instead.

Potter frowned in confusion.

Regulus set his bottle down. “About Davies.”

Understanding flickered in Potter’s expression, his smirk fading.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But my parents do.”

Regulus stiffened. His fingers clenched briefly around his bottle before he forced them to relax. Fucking Davies; even after Regulus had risked his bloody life for him, he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

Potter caught the tension in his posture, because his voice was quick, certain.

“Obviously, we won’t tell anyone,” he said. His voice grew more careful. “I reckon the consequences would be… severe.”

Regulus let out a dry, humourless scoff. God, they’d kill him off instantly. Or well — if they had mercy. If Bellatrix managed to lay as much as a finger on him, it would be anything but quick. It would be a slow, torturous death.

He felt Potter watching him closely, gaze sharp, calculating — but not prying. Regulus knew he was holding back, trying to read between the lines without pushing too far.

“I don’t know the details,” he said, hesitantly and softly. “But I *do* know the place was… well-secured. That it should have been impossible to get him out.” His voice dropped, just a whisper now. “And you did it, Reg. You saved him. You saved a life.”

There was pride in his voice. Soft, genuine pride.

Regulus didn’t look at him. He kept his gaze fixed on the lake, fingers tapping absently against his bottle.

He thought about the life he had taken less than a day after saving Davies.

“I’m no hero, Potter.”

Potter exhaled sharply. “You saved Davies from one of the best-secured places in Britain, risking your own life to do it. That’s *bravery*.”

Regulus scoffed, still staring at the water. The silence stretched between them while he could feel Potter’s curiosity, his restraint – his desperate urge to ask and understand, but knowing that it might push Regulus away.

Regulus was glad — sure, it was awkward, but he preferred it to

discussing Nathaniel Davies and all that had happened in that damned basement.

“So,” Potter said casually, definitely sensing Regulus’s reluctance. “You got any spare wood lying around?”

Regulus blinked. He turned, finally looking at him.

“…What?”

Potter smirked. “Spare wood. Planks, sticks — anything?”

Regulus raised a slow, incredulous eyebrow. “Near the forest, I guess. Why?”

Potter clapped his hands together, practically beaming. “Brilliant. Because I’ve just had the most fantastic idea.”

*****

A boat. The *most fantastic* idea was a boat.

Or well — it hardly deserved the name. It was more like a messy collection of planks held together by sheer stubbornness and magic. Somehow, like always, Regulus had found himself trailing after Potter in his ridiculous quest for wood, and together, they had conjured what could only very generously be called a vessel.

Regulus did not intend to participate; he simply watched, unimpressed, as Potter attempted to assemble the thing. He was just doing such an incredibly lousy job – the structure, the uneven planks, the undeserving confidence with which Potter flicked his wand despite all of this – that at some point Regulus had to step in because the ordeal was grating on his nerves way too much.

At some point, however, Regulus realised that it had all been a bloody scheme.

Potter *knew* how to build a boat. Knew *exactly* what he was doing. He had simply baited Regulus into helping.

By the time Regulus caught on, he was already too deep into it, already too invested, already having far too much fun to care.

Because, truth be told — Regulus had the absolute time of his life.

He had forgotten how much joy Potter could drag out of him; his

stupid jokes, his childish enthusiasm, the way he lit up when he got Regulus to crack — even if it was just a tiny smile.

In one afternoon, Regulus laughed more than he had in weeks; real, unrestrained, belly-aching laughter in the presence of James Potter, who was attempting — and, quite frankly, failing — to construct a proper boat out of spare wood and magic. And when, inevitably, the whole thing collapsed into a miserable excuse for a raft, Potter had simply grinned and patted it as if it was his dearest possession.

“May I present to you — The Hopeless Endeavour.”

Regulus had nearly died laughing.

And in one afternoon alone, Regulus realised, remembered, *deeply* felt all the reasons why he had fallen in love with James Potter.

The way his smirk quirked up on one side, full of mischief. The way there seemed to be no limit to the chaos that was supposed to be his hair. The genuine warmth in his gaze — so open and easy, like looking at Regulus was the best thing that had happened to him that day. The kindness so evident in every part of him and the way he flushed, just barely, when Regulus let his eyes linger a tad too long.

Despite this, though — despite all those feelings resurfacing, crashing over him like a storm, Regulus was the embodiment, the personification of self-restraint. He did not touch him — not once.

The only physical contact had been at the gate, when he had to take Potter’s hand for him to pass through the wards, which was truly a miracle because Regulus, in all honesty, didn’t want to do anything more, had never in his life wanted anything more than, quite literally, feel all of Potter everywhere.

He wanted to feel Potter’s lips — soft, warm, teasing against his own. Wanted to hear that sound he made when Regulus bit his bottom lip, the one that always drove him mad. He wanted to touch him — everywhere — run his hands over the places he knew made Potter shudder. Wanted to feel his breath over his skin and feel Potter’s hands gripping his waist and thighs. He wanted Potter’s lips everywhere on his body for Potter knew, better than anyone in the world, how he most liked to be touched and tasted. And he longed for it, longed for the touch, the taste, the smell of him more than he had ever longed for anything in his life.

It was then, honestly, only a matter of time before his defenses would

break.

*****

The sky had that distinct, beautiful colour of late afternoon in summertime when Regulus stirred awake. It took a moment for him to realise where he was, his mind hazy and disorientated from waking up somewhere unfamiliar. After a few seconds he realised that the warmth against his cheek wasn't a pillow but rather fabric — ah, the picnic blanket beneath him, stretched over the grass by the lake.

In a split second it all came back to him — Potter, the picnic, the lake.

He had only meant to close his eyes for a fleeting moment during Potter's overly enthusiastic recounting of the Puddlemere vs. Magpies match. Regulus had listened to his animated voice, watched him gesture wildly, a smile tugging at his lips as he realised how much he'd missed the life and energy Potter radiated. He had let his eyes flutter shut, just briefly, half-listening to Potter rambling on about some unfair referee call, and then, apparently, he'd drifted off.

Slowly, he stretched, long and lazy, when a flicker of alarm surged through him: it hadn't all been a dream, right? And if it hadn't, surely Potter was still here? Or had he grown bored and left while Regulus slept?

His heart sank at the thought, only to leap again when he saw the door to the garden was ajar, and a very, *very* good smell wafted through it.

Pushing himself up, Regulus ran a hand through his tousled hair before heading toward the kitchens.

The moment he stepped through the doorway, he paused.

Potter stood at the counter, entirely unaware of Regulus's presence, whistling cheerfully as he assembled sandwiches. Regulus couldn't help but smirk.

Regulus took in the scene — Potter's sleeves rolled up, hair even messier than usual, the sunlight spilling through the high windows catching on his cheekbones and the bare stretch of his forearms as he moved. There was something absurdly domestic about it, and for some reason, it made Regulus's chest feel too full with something he couldn't quite place.

And that was when realised it, for the first time, when he actually envisaged it, when he could *see* it; could imagine what a life with Potter might look like.

He'd never considered it before, never thought about it — his future had always been decided *for* him and not by him, even more so now that Sirius was gone. All the major decisions already mapped out, not even on the table for him to consider.

So it had never crossed his mind; an actual life with him.

But now it did.

Barty called him a soppy fool for a reason — at least compared to his friends, Regulus had spent a lot of time thinking about what love, or a family should look like. His ideas used to be very traditional — a providing father, a warm mother, children who were loved endlessly and given all the opportunities the world could offer. Life would be simple — cosy, with family breakfasts, not like the ones he was used to, cold and stiff, but warm and loving; strolls with the family on a day off, laughter echoing through the halls of a warm and inviting home.

And now he could picture it, with him — not traditional in the slightest, but as beautiful and simple as he could dream of. Waking up in the morning to Potter making breakfast, Regulus waxing his broom as a surprise at night, listening to the endless, animated stories Potter was always spinning, and falling asleep as peacefully as he had just now.

The thought of it crashed into him in a raw, ruthless mix of longing and despair. To have a glimpse of it, a taste, and realise it was never going to happen — it sent a lump to his throat.

As if sensing his gaze, Potter turned, his smile wide and bright as the sunlight streaming through the windows.

"So," he smirked, "I took the liberty of raiding your kitchen and made chicken sandwiches."

Regulus stepped forward, sceptical. "You *cooked*?"

Potter snorted. "Easy there, it's a sandwich, not a three-course meal."

Regulus shrugged and took a sandwich from Potter's hand, taking a bite.

And, *shit* – they were *good*.

He chewed, swallowed.

"Delicious," he admitted, although he partially regretted it when his praise made Potter look entirely too pleased with himself.

They sat down together at the kitchen counter, devouring the divine sandwiches Potter had created. Potter's gaze wandered around the massive kitchen, taking in the polished marble countertops, the gleaming copper pots hanging above the stove, the old-fashioned hearth that dominated one corner. It was a space Regulus hardly used; he rarely cooked, preferring to leave meal preparations to Whiskerley.

Potter's eyes swept over the room, lingering on a feminine cloak draped over a chair — a sight that had become far too familiar for Regulus's liking; first Davies had spotted it in the drawing room, and now Potter, here in the kitchen.

He really needed to ask Isa to stop leaving her things everywhere.

It took only a moment for Potter to realise whom the cloak belonged to.

"You're seeing much of Nott these holidays?" he asked, his tone guarded, uncharacteristically stiff.

Regulus chose his words cautiously. "No — she pops by every now and then. She'll be in Damascus for most of the holidays."

Potter nodded, avoiding Regulus's gaze as he took a bite of his sandwich. Then he looked up, as if suddenly piecing things together. "Does she know — about us?"

Regulus nodded. "Yeah."

"You told her?" Potter asked, his voice softer now.

In essence, yes, Regulus had told her — but it hadn't been a deliberate choice; he'd been forced to, after all. He could hardly tell Potter, however, that he'd only told her to secure her help in mastering the fine art of Occlumency, to shield himself from his cousin's prying and avoid a far worse fate.

So, he settled.

"She figured it out," he said, his words intentionally vague.

Potter nodded slowly. “How did she take it?”

“Surprisingly supportive,” Regulus replied, not lying in the slightest.

A thoughtful silence stretched between them as they finished their sandwiches. Regulus had nearly finished his when Potter suddenly straightened, his face alight with what could only be described as the world’s most important revelation.

“You know what would go terrific with these sandwiches?”

Regulus looked at him warily. “Frankly, I’m almost afraid to ask.”

Potter’s wicked grin was downright criminal. “My mum’s cookies.”

Before Regulus could react, Potter was up, rummaging through the cupboards as if he owned the place.

Regulus frowned. “What — Potter — *what* are you doing?”

Potter didn’t even look at him, but the smirk was clear in his voice as he continued his search. “We’re making cookies.”

Regulus pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. “We are not—”

“Oh, Black, but we are,” Potter interrupted cheerfully, already piling an alarming number of ingredients onto the counter.

Regulus exhaled, long and suffering.

*****

It took precisely twenty minutes for the kitchen to be destroyed.

There was flour in Potter’s hair, sugar on Regulus’s sleeve, and, at some point — during a ridiculous, undignified flour fight — Potter had ended up with a streak of batter across his cheekbone. They had argued over measurements, over whether to add more cinnamon — yes, according to Regulus; no, according to Potter, because it wasn’t in his mum’s original recipe — and somehow, even after the cookies were finished, Regulus still found himself hand-deep in the bowl of leftover dough.

Which was the moment when everything changed.

The moment all the suppressed thoughts and feelings – built up for weeks, months, and morphing into something so intense over the

course of this entire day — came to a boiling point, an explosion waiting to happen.

Potter turned, eyes flicking to Regulus's batter-covered fingers, and smirked.

"Oh, give me."

Regulus barely had a second to process before Potter took his hand, fingers curling around his wrist, guiding it toward his mouth. The touch of his hand around his wrist was already too much to bear, but then—

Oh.

Regulus sucked in a sharp breath as Potter, maddeningly slow, brought his fingers to his lips and licked.

The effect was immediate.

Raw. Merciless.

Heat shot through him, so fast it made him dizzy, an unbearable ache settling low in his stomach as Potter — deliberate, unhurried — dragged his tongue along the curve of his knuckles, tasting the batter, dark eyes never leaving his.

Regulus's throat went dry and his trousers became suddenly, unbearably tight.

Because Potter wasn't just licking —he was *doing things*. Things he had done before. Things that made Regulus's pulse pound, his breath hitch, his voice break.

And then — *fuck* — Potter actually took two fingers into his mouth, lips wrapping around them, tongue hot and wet.

Regulus lost all reason.

Potter was smirking around his fingers, eyes dark and knowing, mischief practically dripping from his face.

Oh oh.

It took a considerate long time for Regulus to compose himself, but once he did, he realised that he had let Potter take control for far too long. And he knew — knew exactly how to turn the tables, how to

break James Potter.

Potter might pretend to be all tough and smug, but Regulus knew his weak spots, knew them intimately.

So he didn't hesitate.

With slow precision, he slid his thumb under Potter's chin, tilting his head up, locking their gazes in place.

And then—

He moved his fingers. Slowly. In and out.

Potter stilled for just a second, just long enough for Regulus to catch the way his pupils blew wide, the sharp breath that caught in his throat.

Regulus watched as Potter swallowed hard and continued moving his fingers slowly, mimicking the rhythm of something else completely — when Potter would kneel on the floor, Regulus unable to control, to suppress the instinctive rolling of his hips into Potter's mouth.

Even when the batter was gone, his fingers lingered. He withdrew them slowly, torturously, the longing, the arousal burning hot through his body.

Regulus swallowed and took his hand.

"Let's go."

And then he led him upstairs.

*****

They moved in a frenzy, a hurry, a haze of heat and desire, hands desperate and impatient as they stumbled into the bedroom. Regulus barely registered the soft *thud* of the door when he closed it behind him with his foot. What he did, however, register, was the inexplicable, all-consuming sensation of Potter pressing him against it and kissing him like he'd never done before.

Regulus finally had the chance to bite Potter's bottom lip and coax that moan from deep in his throat — a sound that did not disappoint in the slightest and went straight to Regulus's groin, making him impossibly harder, impossibly more desperate. He tangled his hands in Potter's hair, rolling his hips forward, *feeling* him, hard and aching

against him. It was nearly enough to end him right there. He was not ready for it to end there, though — he wanted to savour every moment, every sensation, preferably until the end of times, so he set all his primal feelings aside and pushed off the door, breathless, guiding Potter towards the bed.

Their shirts hit the floor, their trousers landed somewhere in the corner, their underwear was thrown aside without a second glance.

And then—

Regulus guided Potter onto his back, pressing him into the mattress, hands smoothing over his warm skin as he settled above him. He paused, taking in the sight of Potter under him — his pupils dilated, his breath short and ragged, his hair a chaotic mess – and completely bare, aroused and hard under him. It was truly, undeniably both the most beautiful and most arousing thing Regulus had ever seen in his life.

A sharp heat surged through him, visceral and desperate — an overwhelming need, desperate want to make him his in the most intimate way possible. Beneath the hunger, however, was something softer, something tender; the ache, the longing, the unbearable desire to be close. To be closer to him. To be the closest to him he'd ever been. To be as close to him as physically possible.

Potter shivered beneath him as Regulus bent down, lips brushing the spot behind his ear that Regulus knew was so sensitive. He kissed him there, slow and deliberate, and Potter moaned — head tilting back, body arching into him, utterly lost to the sensation of Regulus lips on his body. The sound of it sent a violent shudder through Regulus. He kissed down his throat, down his chest, his tongue sliding over heated skin, and then lower still, taking him into his mouth in a torturous, slow pace.

And *fuck*.

Potter arched beneath him, gasping his name, hands tangling in his hair as his thighs trembled around him. The sight of him – completely letting go of everything, so *real* in complete surrender – left Regulus breathless, shaking, dizzy with arousal.

But then Potter stilled him.

Regulus barely had time to react before Potter was pulling him back up, their mouths meeting in a slow, consuming kiss.

And then—

“I — I want to feel you.”

Regulus froze, his mind still fogged with pleasure, not entirely understanding – he *could* feel him now, couldn’t he?

Potter swallowed, his voice quiet but certain.

“Inside me. I want to feel you… inside me.”

Silence.

Regulus’s breath caught. His heart stopped.

Potter was looking up at him, vulnerable, with an unmistakable touch of shyness in his dark eyes and — *fuck*.

“If — if you want to, too,” Potter added quickly, voice a little unsteady.

Regulus couldn’t suppress the shaky, incredulous laugh leaving him, muffled against Potter’s lips. He pulled back just slightly, breathless, smiling as he searched Potter’s face.

“Don’t — don’t we need to… prepare for that?” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

The thought had crossed his mind often — well, more than often — especially after sleeping with Isa. It was the only thing he and Potter hadn’t done yet, the last thing yet to explore. The idea of it sent a thrilling rush through him so fiercely that it managed to completely smother the fear of going there. Still, although the moments they had ventured near – just touching – had been incredible, it had also shown that if they were going to do this, they needed time and preparation.

“I — I know some spells,” Potter admitted against his cheek, his voice quiet, uncertain. “Ones that’d make it easier.”

Regulus’s eyes snapped up. He pressed a lingering kiss to Potter’s lips before pulling back just enough to smirk.

“You’ve been doing research, James?”

Potter didn’t say anything and the absolute unnecessary flicker of insecurity across his eyes made Regulus laugh softly. His amusement was quickly stifled by another kiss – messy, rough, with ragged

breaths.

“Yes,” Regulus whispered against his lips. “Let’s… try.”

Potter reached down slowly, fingers brushing along the floor until he found his wand. Regulus watched him, completely mesmerised – watched the rise and fall of his chest, the way his pupils stayed dark and blown, the anticipation palpable in the air. The intoxicating mix of thrill and impatience coursing through Regulus’s body was overwhelming.

They were *really* going to do this.

And yet, nothing — nothing — could have prepared him for the feeling of slowly, *torturously* slowly, pushing inside.

Regulus sucked in a sharp breath, his body trembling, his hands shakily cupping Potter’s face as he sank in.

“*Fuck*,” he hissed. His head dropped against Potter’s, sweat slicking their skin, his voice breaking over the word.

Breathing heavily, he stilled, giving Potter the room to get used to the feeling of him inside him — and, truth to be told, to let himself adjust, too. Because *fuck* – it was too much. It was too overwhelming. Even without moving, the sensation of being inside him, of being this close to him, was almost unbearable. Never had he felt anything like it – there was truly, really nothing that compared to the feeling of Potter hot and tight around him, enclosing him so perfectly, so maddingly, that Regulus was sure he could just come from this. Just from being inside him.

“You alright?” Regulus whispered, voice shaking.

Potter nodded, breath short, chest rising and falling rapidly beneath him.

A moment passed, the only sound coming from their breathing, fast and shallow, as their foreheads pressed together, their gazes locked in something so tender and precious that it made Regulus’s heart ache.

“Tell me — tell me if it hurts,” he whispered.

Potter nodded again.

Regulus exhaled, steadying himself, and then started to move.

It was — *shit*. It was too much. Too good. Too raw. The pleasure tore through him like fire, so intense he had to summon every ounce of restraint he had not to lose it right then and there.

It wasn't just the feeling alone, though, it was equally the sight; the sight of Potter – his head tipped back against the mattress, his fingers digging deep into Regulus's back, his mouth falling open on a moan so intense it was bordering a yelp.

Regulus groaned, his forehead pressing against Potter's. "How — how is it?"

Potter gasped, his hands tightening on him. "Oh, Reg, I can't—" His voice was wrecked, desperate. "It's indescribable."

Regulus smiled against his forehead, moving again, watching, forcing himself to take in every detail, every expression that flickered across Potter's face to preserve it. He moved faster, pressing messy, open-mouthed kisses along Potter's jaw, his cheekbones, his lips. He brushed the damp hair out of his face just so he could properly see him — so he could see the most beautiful expression he had ever witnessed in his life.

And *fuck* — he wasn't going to last.

He wrapped a hand around Potter, stroking him in time with his movements, drawing the most intoxicating sounds from his lips. Potter's body arched beneath him, his thighs trembling, his nails scratching down Regulus's back as he gasped, moaned, broke.

Regulus felt it — felt him tighten, felt the way his body seized as he fell over the edge, eyes squeezing shut in pure, blissful surrender. And the sight of it — the sound of it — it took Regulus with him over that edge.

"Oh, *James*."

And he let go.

Pleasure crashed through him, tore through every nerve, left him shaking, shuddering, completely lost as he surrendered to it, as he let it take him under.

He collapsed against Potter's chest, gasping for air, the world spinning slowly as if the world had taken pity on him — stretching the moment just so he could savour it, live in it just a little longer while his heart

pounded so hard it drowned out everything else — everything except this, this divine dimension Potter had pulled him into, this pleasure so deep, so consuming, that even all the heavens combined couldn't compare.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. They just breathed, Regulus's face buried in Potter's chest with Potter's fingers in his hair – gentle, soothing, stroking through the damp strands while they slowly returned from heaven.

After a while, Regulus lifted his head, meeting Potter's gaze.

Potter smirked.

Regulus let out a sudden burst of laughter — warm, genuine, unstoppable — as the realisation hit him that he had just experienced the most incredible thing in his entire existence — and that Potter had the audacity to top it off with that idiotic, smug grin of his.

"Oh," Potter sighed, as Regulus rolled off him, giving Potter the room to curl up against him, knowing that was what he liked. "If I knew my Mum's cookies did this to you — I would've fed you ages ago."

Regulus froze for a moment and then burst out in incredulous laughter again. "Not the first time I've tasted your mum's cookies, though."

Potter snorted, eyes glinting. "Ah, true."

Regulus lifted his head just enough to smirk back at him. "Also — you *really* want to talk about your mum right now?"

Potter made a face. "Yeah, no. Definitely not." Then, with a lazy, satisfied sigh, he added, "I don't want to talk at all, to be honest."

And then he kissed him — slow and deep, warm and lingering. Regulus smiled against his lips.

*****

The night passed in a haze of warm kisses, whispered and cherishing words, lazy strokes, unrestrained laughter and contented sighs. With Potter in his arms, his hair tickling against Regulus's chest, his body shaking by proxy from Potter's laughter at his own terrible jokes, Regulus forgot about everything — forgot about the world he came from, about the world he lived in, about the world he was fighting for.

Forgot about all that had happened in the previous weeks — forgot about rescuing Davies, forgot about Bellatrix's basement, forgot about the fact that he had seen, had *caused* the light to die in the eyes of Baran Demir. Forgot about everything that stood between him and Potter, until nothing else existed beyond the tangle of their limbs under the sheets, bare and warm, lost in the quiet, untouched realm of them.

He was sure that nothing, *nothing* could be more magical than this; kissing along the curve of Potter's neck, feeling the vibrations of his laughter against his lips, watching the way his breath hitched every time Regulus traced his fingertips down his spine.

And yet, he was in for a surprise.

Because, apparently, there was still some magic left in the world to be discovered.

Regulus lost all track of time beneath the warm sheets, so it could have been an hour, or hours or a lifetime until Potter kissed him so intensely, so thoroughly that it left Regulus lightheaded and aching in a way that stirred a fresh, burning wave of want in his stomach. And when Potter was on top of him, nipping at his collarbone, teasing his nipples and smugly grinning as Regulus arched, catching his breath, he was already hard and desperate beyond measure.

Regulus swallowed hard, fear curling in his stomach — not fear of this, but fear that if he didn't say it now, if he let it slip, he might never have the courage to say it again.

And so, between kisses, between strokes that sent pleasure sparking down his spine, he croaked—

"I — I want to feel it too."

Potter froze.

He lifted his head, his eyes searching his face. "You sure?"

Regulus swallowed. He knew what Potter meant — what he was asking. He knew what this could mean for him, what it could bring up. And yet, he wasn't afraid, only afraid that the fear might stop him from ever doing it.

He nodded. "Yeah. I — I want to experience it too."

Potter's expression softened. He nodded, reassuring, before a slow smirk curled his lips, and he leaned in to nip at Regulus's earlobe.

"It's incredible, Reg."

And it was.

Unbelievable. Overwhelming. Mind-shattering. Earth-stopping.

Nothing — *nothing* — Regulus had ever felt in his life compared to this. Every movement inside him, every push and pull, every inch filled with a pleasure so consuming he thought he had reached the peak of it — only for Potter to prove him wrong with the next movement. And the next. And the next. Until Regulus forgot how to breathe, and forgot how to think, and forgot that there had ever been a time when he hadn't known this feeling.

He was on his knees, gripping the bedframe so desperately he was sure his knuckles had turned white, his body pressing back against Potter, his head dropping backward, dizzy, helpless against the pleasure threatening to consume him. Potter was everywhere — his body closing him from behind, his breath hot against Regulus's neck, his fingers digging into his waist.

"How does it feel?" Potter's voice was tight, shaking, betraying that he was just as overwhelmed by this as him.

Regulus *tried* to answer, tried to form words, tried to think *through* the pleasure — but he couldn't. His head simply dropped back against Potter's shoulder, lips parted, body trembling, unable to do anything but feel, anything but experience.

Potter let out a quiet, breathless laugh against his skin. "I know," he whispered. Then, softer, "Let yourself go, Reg."

And then — Potter's hand wrapped around him.

And Regulus broke.

The pleasure hit him in waves, rolling through him, mastering him completely, owning every part of him, every vein, pore and inch of skin. He felt Potter tense behind him, heard his sharp, gasping moan, felt the way he shuddered as he released too.

Regulus was completely ruined – he collapsed against Potter's shoulder, trembling, gasping for air, barely able to function, unable to

form a single thought or word.

Or well — until Potter pressed a lazy, sloppy kiss against his jaw and Regulus – overwhelmed, wrecked beyond belief – cracked and blurted out the last words he'd expected to say as he'd opened the window to bloody Elagabalus.

"Fuck," he rasped. Then, softer, raw, helpless against the realisation —

"I love you, James."

For a second, there was only the sound of their breathing, and then, then Potter smiled — the brightest, warmest, most blindingly beautiful smile Regulus had ever seen. He turned his head, pressing a sideways kiss to Regulus's temple, his lips soft, lingering.

"I love you too, Reg."

*****

Later, the bathroom was warm, filled with steam curling along the edges of the large tub. The water smelled of something floral and the surface was clouded with soft, white bubbles that popped up and reformed as they shifted slightly.

Regulus sat against the back of the tub, Potter settled between his legs, leaning against his chest. He liked the sensation of Potter's warm body against his. Regulus let his head rest against the rim of the tub, eyes half-lidded, his entire body lax with utter exhaustion and contentment. He wasn't asleep, but he felt as close to it as he could be without fully drifting off. And, for the first time in what felt like years, his mind was completely quiet.

Unfortunately, though, Potter definitely was *not*.

"I'm just saying — bath foam is objectively better than bath oil," he was saying, swirling his fingers through the bubbles. "It's fun, for one. And it doesn't make everything slippery as hell — d'you know how dangerous bath oil is? You nearly died walking to the sink earlier—"

"Potter, *shut up*," Regulus interrupted, voice thick with drowsiness. "I came here for my peace."

Potter exhaled through his nose, rolling his eyes before smirking against Regulus's ear. "Normally, I would've felt bad about that snarky comment, Black."

Regulus let his eyes flutter shut again, sinking deeper into the bath. "Why not today?"

"Because *you* said it first."

Regulus groaned.

Potter turned his head slightly, his grin audible in his voice. "*You* said 'I love you' first."

Regulus groaned again, biting his lip to keep from smiling. "I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"

*****

Regulus stirred awake, slowly, groggily. The sluggish feeling in his limbs, the haziness in his mind betrayed that he had definitely slept too little. Despite the fact that they had changed the sheets and had taken a bath, the room smelled of sweat and the previous night although — fortunately — of Potter, too.

The room was complete chaos — like they had left it at night. Their clothes were still where they had come off, the bathroom was ajar with the tub still full with cooled water, the floor damp from their exit. The sheets were tangled around them, one barely covering Potter's hip.

And Potter — *Potter*. He was pressed against him, ridiculously warm, his arm slung carelessly over Regulus's waist, his chest rising and falling in deep, steady breaths. Like always, his face was softer in sleep, mouth slightly open. He looked peaceful, unguarded. For a moment, Regulus just looked at him, in all his perfect beauty.

He knew he had to return to life, to reality, quickly. It was dangerous having him here. Last night, *all of it* had been reckless, imprudent, dangerous. But now, just for this brief moment, he wanted to stay in this space where there were no consequences, only him and Potter and warmth and silence.

The sheets shifted as Potter moved slightly, murmuring something unintelligible against Regulus's shoulder before burying his face there with a sigh. Warmth spread through Regulus's chest. He hadn't realised he was smiling—

Until the sharp creak of the door wiped the softness clean off his face.

"Rise and shine, sunshine — I'm leaving for Dama—"

Isa's voice cut off abruptly.

Regulus's entire body seized in sheer horror.

Isa stood in the doorway, utterly frozen, her eyes blown wide as she took in the scene — the room, the discarded clothes, the tangled limbs, and, most damningly, James Potter, very much naked and still in the bed.

A long silence stretched between them.

"Oh," Isa breathed finally.

Regulus tried to speak – truly, he tried — but nothing came out. His mind was completely frozen — utterly, completely useless as he searched, grasped for words that did not exist.

Isa, for once, seemed equally stunned, stuck in place.s

Potter, however, was not.

He stretched lazily, back arching, arms lifting over his head in a way that should not have been allowed in this *very* awkward, precarious situation. He blinked, feigning drowsy confusion before his lips curled into something entirely too wicked.

"Morning, Nott," he drawled, voice thick with sleep, propping himself up on one elbow. "What a surprise."

Isa still did not move.

Potter turned to Regulus, his smirk turning into a thoughtful expression. "Didn't you close off the Floo to everyone?"

Now it was Isa's turn to smirk. "Oh, he did — to everyone but me." Potter arched a single eyebrow, his gaze sweeping over her. "What — jealous, Potter?"

Potter rolled his eyes and was undoubtedly about to strike back when, suddenly, he was distracted by the clock on the wall. "*Shit* —I have to leave."

"Yes, you do," Isa said dryly, folding her arms in the doorway.

Potter turned back to her, exhaling dramatically before looking

around at the absolute state of the room. Then, slowly, theatrically, he looked her up and down. "What — jealous, Nott?"

Isa scowled.

Regulus, for his part, was still frozen in the sheets, his entire soul trying to exit his body from sheer mortification because he was naked under the sheets, Potter was naked under the sheets and moving far too recklessly for someone who was, in fact, completely naked under the sheets, and Isa was standing there.

Oh, his head hurt.

He pointedly covered his face with a pillow.

Potter, completely unbothered, turned back to him, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Reg seems a bit frozen," he observed casually. "Might want to think of a creative way to wake him up."

Regulus groaned, voice muffled against the pillow. "Potter, *shut up*."

Potter laughed, then turned to Isa. "You might want to turn around if you don't want to enjoy the view."

Isa flushed, scowling as she turned sharply on her heel.

Regulus dropped the pillow and saw how Potter got out of bed, stretched again, definitely just to be insufferable, and pulled on his boxers. Then, instead of heading straight for his clothes, he leaned down over Regulus, his body casting a shadow over him. Regulus was very aware that Isa was still in the room, still hearing everything and definitely stealing secret glances at them.

"Too bad," Potter whispered, lips brushing Regulus's ear, voice laced with amusement. "I had other ways in mind to wake you up this morning."

Regulus's breath hitched. The words sent a sharp, heated pulse through him, Potter's hand bracing against the mattress beside him, lips skimming his jawline.

For a moment, Regulus forgot Isa entirely, forgot everything except Potter. His body leaned toward him instinctively, chest tightening as their eyes met.

Then—

Regulus remembered Isa was there and yanked himself back into reality.

Potter sighed dramatically before stepping away, finally gathering his clothes, dressing slowly, deliberately, like he had all the time in the world, like he was enjoying every last moment of this — which he, beyond a doubt, was.

Once his shirt and trousers were on, he returned to Regulus's side, cupped his jaw, brushed his thumb under his ear, and kissed him. It was soft, tender, and entirely too intimate for an audience.

Regulus knew he was doing it just to rile Isa up.

And yet, he still found himself unable to withstand him.

"You *loooove* me," Potter whispered, his grin maddeningly smug.

Regulus groaned, swatting at him half-heartedly while he felt his face flush. "Get *lost,* Potter."

Potter laughed, voice warm and teasing. "That's not what you called me last night, Black."

Regulus hurled a pillow at him.

Potter dodged it easily, then turned to Isa, eyes glinting in mischief as he said challengingly, "Last night, it was just James — over and over again."

Isa groaned. Regulus dove under the covers in absolute mortification while Potter merely laughed, looking far too pleased with himself.

Regulus was almost glad he had to leave.

But then, suddenly, he remembered something. He shot up, looking at Isa. "Oh, wait, Isa — if you don't mind, I'd like to have a word with James…"

Isa blinked, definitely startled by Regulus's use of Potter's first name.

Potter smirked smugly, the innuendo clear in his eyes.

Regulus threw him a glare. "Not for *that*, Potter."

Isa shook her head in disbelief, like she was still trying to wrap her mind around all of this, before walking out.

Regulus turned back to Potter. "How can I reach Davies?"

Potter frowned. "Err — why?"

Regulus's expression hardened. "Well, I want to remind the bloke that he promised not to tell anyone about what happened. Might want to get creative in reminding him, because if saving his bloody life isn't enough—"

Potter's brow furrowed. "What are you on about?"

Regulus stilled. "*You* said — Davies *told* —"

Potter shook his head. "I never said Davies said a word."

Regulus's stomach dropped. "What?"

Potter hesitated. Then, he started to explain carefully. "So — I… I walked into my parents in the kitchen."

Regulus arched an eyebrow, his tone very judgmental. "Were you wearing your cloak again?"

Potter nodded, sheepish.

"Unethical, Potter," Regulus shot. "Eavesdropping on your parents like that."

Potter sighed. "I didn't *mean* to, I was just trying to — ah, never mind. I just… overheard them talking about it. How you'd saved him. And, well, I remember my parents explicitly saying that Davies didn't spill a word. Kept his mouth shut."

The words hit him like a jinx to the chest. Regulus's blood turned cold as his mind started racing instantly.

What?

"Then how do they know about it?"

Chapter End Notes

Alright so, this is def one of my favourite chapters, but I made some last-minute changes and it's already late so I truly hope there's no typos etc. I just really wanted to update today.

Then.... a lot of Jegulus, yeahhh. This is definitely the most

explicit sexual content I've ever written; strictly speaking not completely... crucial but definitely adding to the depth of the characters and well, I made a promise after the Isa-scene; I felt like I needed to add some weight to the relationship between Reg/James vis-à-vis Reg/Isa.

One chapter left...

Chapter 28: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Ah, here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After James left, Regulus's mind raced so hard that the only thing he knew would — probably, hopefully — help was a near-lethal ice-cold shower. It was beneath the merciless spray that he tried to make sense of all the facts, of all the scenarios that crossed his mind, the gaps of logic gnawing at him.

James's parents knew — but not from Davies. Surely Davies had told them *something* — he had shown up in their fireplace, suddenly, and would've *had* to come up with some kind of explanation for his sudden need for protection. And he hadn't looked good in Black Manor's drawing room…

Still, where did Regulus come into the equation?

There was *nothing* that would explain Regulus's involvement if Davies had truly said nothing. It couldn't have been a random guess, a wild assumption. Someone had told them.

Which meant one of three things.

Perhaps James had misunderstood.

Perhaps James had lied.

Regulus flinched. No — James wouldn't have lied, he was sure; he had looked so genuine and well, James was probably the most trustworthy person he had ever met. Well, except for the fact that he was lying about Regulus and him to the rest of the world, and, most importantly, to his best friend. So, perhaps, not the *most* trustworthy person…

Regulus let out a quiet, humourless laugh, shaking his head under the freezing water.

No. That was different.

James would definitely have told the truth if it hadn't been dangerous

— would have screamed it from the rooftops even. The only reason he lied was because he *had* to, for the sake of all their lives. If Sirius knew, the rest of the world would definitely find out. No, telling Sirius that his best friend had fallen in love with his brother — the thought was so incredulously absurd that it actually made Regulus laugh aloud in the shower.

So then — perhaps there was a reason James couldn't tell him?

Maybe Davies *had* talked, but James just couldn't say how they knew?

Regulus exhaled sharply.

Unlikely.

His head dropped back against the shower wall, the cold water numbing his skin. No matter how he twisted it, how he swirled it, it didn't make sense.

He sighed deeply in resignation.

It was the third option. The only other explanation.

There was a spy.

Fuck.

*****

Having put it off for as long as he could — changing his t-shirt twice, his trousers thrice, making his bed the Muggle way only to remake it with his wand — Regulus sighed and forced himself to get on with it.

He let his hand trail along the banister as he descended the stairs, ears pricked for signs of Isa. He caught the faint sounds of movement and the scent of toast and tea coming from the morning room.

Once he arrived, he found her just stepping into the kitchen from the morning room, mid-wand-pull, sleeves pushed up as she flicked her wrist and cleaned up most of the disaster that had become the kitchen the previous afternoon. At remarkable speed and with a remarkably small amount of spells, she managed to clean the flour-dusted surfaces, the batter streaks across the counter and the absurd amount of dirty pots and utensils Regulus and James had used making cookies.

Regulus hovered in the doorway, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

Then he felt rather ridiculous for just standing there, watching her clean up his mess.

So, he coughed and stepped inside.

“He left?”

Isa turned, sharp eyes immediately locking onto his, but before she could properly pin him under her knowing gaze, he moved. He strode to the cabinets and busied himself with assembling the coffee. He could have just called for Whiskerley, but he needed something to do with his hands — some excuse not to meet Isa’s gaze while they had this conversation.

Isa exhaled, leaning a hip against the counter. “Yes, he ‘knew the way out,’ apparently. Merlin knows if he’s actually gone, though. He might be spying on us from the garden or something.”

Regulus arched an unimpressed eyebrow as he reached for the coffee tin, then the kettle, filling it with water. “No. He wouldn’t do that.”

Isa didn’t answer right away. When Regulus finally glanced over, he found her studying him with quiet contemplation. Slowly, her gaze drifted down, landing on his left inner arm.

“He knows about that?”

Regulus swallowed, grip tightening around the kettle handle. “No.”

Isa sighed, her face serious but wry. “You’ve got to be careful, Reg. It’s not just about our side not finding out… Don’t forget the side he’s on – the side he’ll be fighting on. This is so much bigger than just… whatever it is you have.”

Regulus didn’t answer. He knew she was right — it had, after all, always been the main reason why this couldn’t last. Them both being blokes was already an atrocity enough, but him being *James Potter*, the eldest and only son to Euphemia and Fleamont Potter, the core, the heart of the modernists.

That brought it to a whole new level of complicated.

“Don’t let our work before Easter be in vain, Reg,” she said, her voice serious but soft.

A wave of shame washed over him. He nodded slightly. “I know, Ies,”

he said, his voice quiet.

He focused on pouring the coffee grounds and felt her watchful gaze as he prepared their coffee, but he didn't look up. Eventually, he slid a cup toward her. Isa took it, curling her hands around the warmth as she perched on one of the stools. They sat in silence for a while.

Then, Isa's gaze travelled over the kitchen that was now, thanks to her literal and figurative magic, spotless and clean.

Her eyes started to twinkle and her lips twitched as the realisation dawned. "You two made cookies?"

Regulus scratched the back of his head, awkward, pretending to be deeply immersed in his coffee. "Yeah."

When he looked up, he saw she was barely able to contain her hilarity. She was biting her lip not to burst in laughter at the ridiculous idea of James Potter and Regulus Black making cookies in Black Manor's kitchen — and the fact that Regulus felt *very* awkward about his best friend getting a glimpse of this.

Although the cookies were just the tip of the iceberg, of course. Regulus swallowed, heat creeping up his neck as he thought about Isa walking in on them in his bedroom.

"Sorry… you had to see… all of that."

Isa snorted, unfazed, but said nothing for a moment. Then she arched a brow. "Is he always so full of himself?"

Regulus huffed a quiet laugh. "Nah, he actually isn't." Then, before he could stop himself, he added, "He's the kindest person I've ever met."

Isa's eyebrow climbed higher, her smirk turning positively wicked and victorious which made Regulus both annoyed and uncomfortable.

He groaned. "Don't do that, Nott."

Isa burst out laughing. "Sorry, it's just — Merlin, I couldn't picture it before. Sure, he's incredibly handsome and all that, but—"

Regulus's head snapped up, startled. Isa was confessing that she found James *incredibly handsome*?

Isa, definitely picking up on his train of thought, rolled her eyes. "What? It's an objective fact."

Regulus shot her a dry look. “Handsome isn’t objective at all, Nott.”

Isa smirked. “Oh, the female Hogwarts population would strongly disagree with you on that. He *is* one of the Big Six, after all.”

Regulus froze mid-sip. He blinked at her. “What?”

Isa raised an eyebrow. “Oh, come on, you’ve never heard of the Big Six?”

Regulus blinked.

“…No,” he said slowly, his brow furrowing. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Isa sighed like he was the dumbest person alive. “Oh, you truly do live in your own world, don’t you?”

Regulus shot her a fierce glare. “No, I just like to occupy my mind with stuff that actually matters—”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

Regulus rolled his eyes. “So, what’s this Big Six thing?”

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “It’s a term for the six most—” she paused, looking for the right word, “—I’d say… ‘sought-after’ blokes at Hogwarts. It started as some Hufflepuff thing a couple of years ago, but now it’s an actual thing — they nominate people every year and all.”

Regulus couldn’t suppress a snort at the complete absurdity of this. “People actually waste their time on this kind of rubbish?” He took another sip of coffee, then smirked over the rim of his cup. “Let me guess, Davies was on the list.”

Isa rolled her eyes, biting a small smile. “Obviously. He’s been on it since it started three years ago.”

Then, suddenly, her expression turned dangerously amused.

“Last year, the others were a Hufflepuff seventh-year, Potter, your brother, a friend of Nathaniel’s and…” her smirk stretched wider, eyes dancing with mischief, “you.”

Regulus choked on his coffee.

Isa lost it, doubling over in laughter.

Regulus wiped his mouth, struggling to look unfazed as his eyes teared up from coughing. “What?”

Isa bit her lip, her shoulders shaking. “Oh, yes, Reg, you were voted one of the Big Six.”

Regulus shot her a flat look. “Such an honour. I’m glad I haven’t noticed any of these daft girls acting on it.”

Isa snorted, something incredulous and utterly amused crossing her features. “Oh, Reg — they would have, if I hadn’t taken serious measures.”

Regulus looked up, narrowing his eyes. *What?*

“What are you talking about?”

Isa laughed, still way too amused by this conversation. “All the times people didn’t think we were dating, I had to work to make sure you weren’t flooded by girls trying to snog you. I’ve confiscated more than just one love potion meant for you.”

Regulus froze, his body tense with discomfort. He truly didn’t like this conversation. “That is—” he started, looking for the right word, “— mortifying, actually.”

Isa, savouring Regulus's discomfort, clapped her hands together as if about to reveal the best part yet. “Oh, yes — the girls see you as the … *mysterious* version of your brother. Same build, same ‘piercing grey eyes they could just drown in’. All the intrigue, but none of the loud.”

Regulus felt his face heat. He scowled. “Oh, sod off, Nott.”

Isa threw her head back, laughing, her tongue between her teeth.

Regulus groaned and turned to pour another cup of coffee. But then, suddenly, he realised that the discomfort of facing Isa and the utter awkwardness of the conversation that had followed, had made him nearly forget about the actual important things in life.

He straightened, shaking off the awkwardness, and turned to Isa.

“You’re leaving for Damascus today?”

Isa nodded.

“What time, and how?”

“International Portkey. Security’s a nightmare — Syria’s locking down its borders, at least to the Brits. We leave at three.”

Regulus stood abruptly. He knew what he had to do.

“I have to do something. But — stay here. Wait for me. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Isa frowned slightly, caught off guard. “Alright… you okay, Reg?”

Regulus didn’t respond, instead downed his coffee in one go and turned on his heel, striding towards the fireplace in the Entrance Hall.

*****

Feeling a very unsettling mix of curiosity and fear, Regulus flooed to Cissy’s home and, with the help of the Malfoy House Elf, he found her in the garden, basking in the sun with a copy of the Daily Prophet in hand.

She looked utterly at ease, the sunlight catching in her pale hair, her delicate fingers skimming absentmindedly over the parchment as she read. When she noticed him, her brows furrowed in confusion before her expression softened into a warm smile.

“Hi, Reg,” she greeted, immediately turning to the House Elf. “Dobby, tea, please.”

“Oh, no thanks, Cissy,” Regulus interrupted quickly. “I can’t stay long. I have… something later.”

Cissy did a very poor job of hiding her smirk. “Ah, yes. Dear Isadora is leaving for Damascus today, isn’t she?”

Regulus rolled his eyes but didn’t take the bait. There was no time to waste, after all. “Look,” he sighed, choosing his words carefully, “what was the deal with Legot?”

Cissy blinked at him, clearly caught off guard. He couldn’t blame her — the ordeal had been done and over with for months.

“What were those ‘loose ends’ everyone was talking about?”

Cissy studied him for a beat, straightening in her seat and setting her Prophet aside. “Are you… alright, Reg?”

“Yeah,” Regulus nodded quickly, trying to look both as cheerful and as nonchalant as possible — a rather difficult task, seeing he was far from both. “It just… crossed my mind, and you know, I want to learn from it for next time. It just… fascinates me.” He forced a casual shrug. “Thought I’d pop by.”

Cissy didn’t look entirely convinced, but she rolled with it anyway. “Alright,” she said thoughtfully. “Well — it’s just one of the strange things that have been happening this past… year or so.”

Regulus felt something cold and heavy settle in his gut. “Really? Like… what?”

Cissy glanced at him, then gestured for him to sit. He settled across from her, half in the sun.

“Well, you know… the captives for the inauguration?”

Regulus forced himself to stay still, though his heart hammered against his ribs. He had a fairly good idea about where this conversation was going and he really, *truly* couldn’t give anything away.

“Yeah?” he said, voice as steady as he could manage.

Cissy hesitated. “Well — look, it doesn’t concern you and all, and I’m probably not allowed to share, but well, you’re *you*.”

Regulus nodded, urging her to go on.

“One of you had another captive for the inauguration.”

“Oh?” Regulus feigned ignorance. “What happened with him–” he added quickly, “–or her?”

Cissy exhaled. “He escaped.”

Regulus tried his best to look startled by this piece of information. It wasn’t surprising, though, that she brought it up. It was a very big deal, after all — someone escaping from Bellatrix’s basement.

The next piece of information, though, truly *did* stun him.

“And,” Cissy continued, “Bella is convinced it was an inside job.”

Regulus could barely breathe, his throat drier than parchment. “Oh… why?”

Cissy leaned back slightly. “She had an alarm on her bedroom. The captive got out through her fireplace.”

It hit Regulus like a physical blow to the head. He struggled to keep his expression neutral as his hands trembled in his lap.

Cissy went on, completely unaware of his internal panic. “And there wasn’t much time between the captive disappearing and the alarm going off, so — well, he knew his way around. Knew she had a private fireplace, too.”

Regulus swallowed hard, urging himself to stay composed. He thought it best to change the subject. “And this is connected to… the case with Legot?”

Cissy nodded. “Well, yeah, we think so. The thing about Legot was strange because, of course, he *knew* he’d be asked to join. And with all his brothers being modernists, we expected resistance. But then we managed to capture someone who was part of his supply line, and he confessed that just the night before, Legot had tried to relocate a *lot* of his supplies — different warehouses, different safe houses.” She shook her head grimly. “It must have cost him tremendously. You don’t make a move like that unless you feel threatened.”

Regulus felt the room spinning around him. “You think he was tipped off?”

Cissy exhaled. “Yes. But that was impossible, because only a few people knew. And you came to us directly. They went to the location the minute you returned to Beauxbatons.”

Regulus’s stomach dropped. His blood ran cold as the realisation slammed into him like a Bludger.

No. Fucking. Way.

Cissy’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What? Why do you look like that? Are you alright, Reg?”

Regulus forced a nod, his mind racing. “Yes, yes. Thanks, I was just… curious. Oh, and look at the time. I have to leave now — you know, say goodbye to Isa…”

Cissy didn’t look entirely convinced but let it go. “Alright, Reg. Don’t be a stranger, alright?”

“Sure.”

Regulus turned sharply on his heel and strode toward the fireplace in the Entrance Hall, trying to look calm and steady while his heart was still hammering violently against his ribs. He flooed back to Black Manor and returned to the kitchen, where Isa was still sitting, sipping another cup of coffee.

She raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised by his quick return.

“You alright?” she asked cautiously.

Regulus nodded, though the unrest was practically dripping off him as he paced the room. His mind whirled. What now? What to do? Where to go?

He looked at Isa, the concern in her eyes deepening.

And then it clicked.

Oh *yes*. He knew *exactly* what now. What to do. Where to go.

God, such *impeccable* timing.

“Can I come with?”

Isa frowned, a mix of confusion and alarm plain on her face. “Huh?”

Regulus swallowed. “I — I need to see your father. He’s already in Damascus, isn’t he?”

Isa’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I never told you he was already in Damascus.”

Regulus’s gaze flicked to the Mark on his arm.

Isa sighed in realisation. “Ah. Right. I forgot for a moment that you two are… affiliates.” She studied him for a moment before adding, “So… this is related to that?”

Regulus exhaled, nodding. “Yeah. Something like that.”

*****

Regulus had a hard time shrugging off Ariadna and Elara, who had clearly missed him as they hadn’t seen him for almost a year. They clung to his arms, chattering excitedly, their voices overlapping. Isa,

however, sensed the urgency in Regulus's demeanour — and probably most of all in his eyes — and fortunately lured her sisters with her to the courtyard to go play in the fountain.

"C'mon losers, let's see if the water's still cool," she said, her voice a tad too enthusiastic, as she guided them from the Entrance Hall to the courtyard.

This left Regulus alone with Mrs. Nott, who, after ordering their House Elf to put all their belongings in the right rooms, turned to Regulus with a kind smile.

"I am sure Magnus is in the library. Don't worry about disturbing him — I'm sure he'll be glad to see you."

Regulus thanked her and made his way upstairs. The library was on the first floor, and the moment he hovered outside the door, the familiar scent of parchment and old wood brought back an unsettling memory — the last time he had been there, hiding with Isa, overhearing her parents discuss both his biggest secret and his biggest nightmare.

A shudder ran down his spine, but he forced himself to focus. Taking a steadying breath, he knocked on the wooden door.

"Come in," came Mr. Nott's voice.

Regulus pushed the door open and stepped inside. Mr. Nott was seated in an armchair near the corner, a glass of dark liquor in one hand, a cigar in the other. Sitting across from him, lounging with that signature air of ease, was Victor Thorne.

Regulus exhaled. At least this part had worked out.

"Weren't you joining Magnus at some point?" Regulus had asked.

Thorne had nodded. "A day before the rest of the Notts," he had said smoothly, taking a slow draw from his cigar. "We have some business to handle."

True to his word, Thorne had apparently indeed accompanied Mr. Nott to Damascus.

He smirked, but something was off. His usual amusement was there,

but his eyes — his sharp, ever-watchful eyes — lacked their usual glint.

"Mr. Black," Thorne smirked, exhaling a curl of smoke. "What a surprise."

Mr. Nott looked genuinely caught off guard. It *was* rather unconventional to show up at the Notts' estate unannounced or without invitation. "Ah, Regulus. I didn't know you were… coming with?"

Regulus tried to appear composed, but his palms were slick, his throat dry.

"Yes, well," he started, offering Mr. Nott a strained smile before turning to Thorne. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you, Victor? Alone."

Both men looked momentarily puzzled. Mr. Nott arched an eyebrow, but Thorne… looked almost impressed. He took another slow drag from his cigar, exhaled, then nodded.

Mr. Nott stood, glancing between them with a flicker of discomfort. "Ah. Well. I suppose I'll go say hello to my wife and daughters." He hesitated for only a moment before adding, "Take all the time you need."

The door closed with a faint click behind him. Regulus waited until Mr. Nott's footsteps faded before turning back to Thorne.

Thorne gestured toward a chair, but Regulus didn't sit.

Thorne tilted his head, studying him. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Black?"

Regulus's breath came slow and controlled, but his heart was racing. He met Thorne's gaze, steady despite all the feelings, thoughts and realisations overwhelming him.

"It was you," he said, voice low but certain. "You tipped him off. You tipped Legot off."

Oh, Regulus had been *so* stupid — it should have crossed his mind immediately; the moment he heard that something had gone wrong with Legot, that there were some 'loose ends', he should have thought back to that moment.

Sure, even Bellatrix hadn't thought about it — had only gone over the memories of Regulus actually *finding out* about Legot's location and of him and Thorne reporting their findings to the Dark Lord.

But that hadn't been when Regulus had *told* Thorne.

No. He had told him the *night before*.

"We cannot disrupt the meeting tonight."

"We will go tomorrow night. Seven sharp," Thorne had continued. "So we won't disrupt matters tonight."

Fuck — there had been no meeting at all. Thorne had just bought himself time. Time to warn Legot.

Regulus clenched his jaw.

So fucking stupid.

He should have seen it. Should have remembered.

Thorne exhaled, placing his glass down with a soft clink. "Yes," he said simply, with a wry smile.

Regulus had known it the moment James had said it — that his parents had heard about Davies from someone else; but, still, hearing it made him feel like he was just beaten up like a Muggle.

"You — you told them," Regulus forced out. "Told them about… Davies."

Thorne regarded him for a moment, then exhaled. "The Potters? Yes."

Regulus's knees buckled. He dropped into the chair, stunned, confused, exasperated. His hands hung uselessly at his sides. "I — I don't understand," he muttered. "You… tried to make me save him?"

Thorne let out a mirthless chuckle. "Call me a foolish romantic, if you must, but yes — I found it a rather gruesome end for Davies, just for loving someone. Don't you agree?"

Surely Regulus agreed, but he didn't say so. Instead, he narrowed his eyes. "Why not save him yourself?"

Thorne chuckled darkly, taking another draw from his cigar. "Oh, no. Your dear cousin has been watching me for a while now. If anyone was going to save Nathaniel Davies, it wasn't going to be me. Besides — I don't own a Black House Elf. And as you know, only those could apparate into that basement." He exhaled, shaking his head. "It was a *very*, very wild shot, though."

Regulus frowned. "What do you mean?"

Thorne sighed, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "First, you had to find out he was there, didn't you?"

Regulus inhaled sharply. "It was you? *You* who put the parchment in the drawer?"

Thorne smiled. "Gotcha." He nodded. "Yes. I made Narcissa ask you about it."

Regulus was too stunned to respond. He just stared.

No. It could *not* be him.

Not Thorne.

Not his mentor.

Not the man who had recruited for the Dark Lord at Hogwarts, the editor of *The Pure Quill.*

Im-fucking-possible.

Thorne leaned back. "That left me with the task of giving you instructions on *how* to get him out, though, didn't it? I couldn't tell you directly. I spent days wrecking my brain over it, but you gave me the perfect opportunity when you walked in on me having breakfast with Narcissa. I wrapped it carefully, but you figured it out, didn't you?"

Regulus exhaled sharply, nodding, the disbelief about all the information, all the uncovering plain in his voice. "Yeah," he croaked. "Took me all night, though."

Thorne smirked. "Impressive, still, Mr. Black. You have no idea how clever you are. But the last piece… that was the most crucial."

Regulus frowned. "What do you mean?"

Thorne's eyes gleamed. "You needed the cloak, didn't you? And there was only *one* way you could have known about the cloak. One way you could know where it was, *who* it belonged to, and how to access it."

Regulus went deathly pale. He leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling.

No. Fucking. Way.

Thorne exhaled a plume of smoke. "I had my suspicions, of course. But I didn't know for sure — didn't know for sure if you loved James Potter."

Regulus flinched. He refused to look at him.

So this — this was what Thorne had been implying that time at Black Manor, when he'd stopped by to collect the latest edition of the Pure Quill.

"Isa," Regulus had clarified. "She's not my girlfriend."

Thorne had studied him for a long moment. His gaze had been, as always, unreadable and penetrating.

Then, finally, he had nodded. "Yes, I know."

He knew, he had known — had known about him and James all along.

"How long?" Regulus forced himself to ask, voice hoarse. "How long have you known?"

Thorne tilted his head, exhaling another thread of smoke. "I had my suspicions at Hogwarts. But at Beauxbatons—" he let out a quiet chuckle, almost amused, "it was blatantly clear that one of the two beds was unslept."

Regulus's mind snapped back to that night. The night Thorne had come to collect him and James, the night they returned to Hogwarts because Uncle Alphard had died. He remembered, now, how Thorne's eyes had flicked over the dorm — James, bare-chested, both their wand cases on *his* nightstand, one empty bed…

Thorne took another slow drag. "And don't forget — I *am* trained to be observant."

Regulus swallowed thickly. His voice came out quiet. "So… you're a spy?" He wet his lips. "You're with them? With the modernists?"

Thorne nodded. "Yeah."

Regulus stared, his mind struggling to keep up. "But — you've done so much… The Pure Quill, mentoring at Hogwarts—"

Thorne hummed. "Yes, well. I had to play my part right, didn't I?" His smirk was almost tired. "I worked for years to get this access. To get here."

Regulus was too stunned, too confused — too fucking staggered — to make any real sense of what was unfolding; except for one thing. He was alone in this. He was the only one who knew.

"What… happens now?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, still struggling to believe this was real.

Thorne let out a wry laugh. "Well, luck isn't exactly on my side today. I just had a conversation with Magnus, and he hasn't realised it yet, but he shared something that made it painfully clear — it's only a matter of minutes, an hour at most, before the Dark Lord finds out that I am, in fact, a spy."

Regulus's heart lurched. "Then why the hell are you still here?" He shot to his feet. "Go. Leave."

Thorne laughed — genuine and unrestrained. "Oh, you're special, Regulus." He shook his head, his expression turning serious again. "No — my fate is already sealed. I betrayed Magnus Nott in a very cunning manner. Magnus and I go way, way back, you see. He'll never stop looking for me." Thorne leaned back slightly. "Now, Davies — he'll be safe enough with the Potters and Dumbledore's protection. But me?" He let out a sharp breath. "No. It won't just be Magnus hunting me. Your dear cousin and the Dark Lord will never sleep until they've found me. No, it's game over for me." His expression darkened. "And besides, I don't like being on the run."

Regulus's pulse pounded in his ears. "Then what—"

Thorne's breath hitched. He hissed, clutching his left arm as his Mark burned.

And then he lifted his head, slowly, as if a form of resignation mastered him.

His expression was eerily calm.

"You have to kill me."

Silence.

Regulus gaped at him. "What?"

Thorne's voice was steady. "I'm being summoned. They *know*. It's only minutes before they Apparate outside and come for me."

Regulus couldn't move.

Thorne's gaze sharpened. "I'm serious, Regulus. I *can't* kill myself. You have to do it — before I fall into her hands." His voice dropped to a near whisper. "Please don't let me fall prey to her. Kill me."

Regulus didn't move. He didn't breathe. He didn't blink.

He was completely, utterly frozen.

Both his brain and his body — frozen in time and place.

Thorne let out a soft, humourless laugh. Then, gently, he stood, reached forward and guided Regulus to his feet.

Regulus, still in shock, barely registered the movement — barely noticed as Thorne slipped a hand into his wand pocket, drawing the wand before pressing it into Regulus's fingers.

Barely registered the weight of it. So real. So heavy. So *wrong*.

Thorne's Mark burned again, making him curse under his breath.

Then, he straightened—

—and met Regulus's gaze.

"Before you do it—" Thorne exhaled, "—as a dying man, I'd like to share a few things."

A noise came from afar — rowdy and chaotic. Thorne froze, then forced a breath.

"First of all," he said, "always know, always *remember* what you're fighting for, Regulus. Because the side you're fighting for *now* —" he let out a bitter laugh "—it will *never, ever* accept it… accept something like you and Potter."

Regulus let out a sharp, bitter sound of his own. "Oh, and the other side will?"

Thorne smiled wryly. "Well. There's definitely room for… improvement there, too. But they're far, *far* more evolved in that department."

His voice dropped slightly, softer. "You're so smart, Regulus, yet you miss this – it's all connected, you see? Hate for Muggleborns. Hate for half-bloods. Hate for Muggles. Hate for everyone who is different."

Regulus's breath caught.

Thorne held his gaze. "Everyone who… *loves* differently."

Regulus's throat went drier than ever, his voice breaking. "I – I don't want to kill you," he whispered. "I — I can't."

Another rowdy sound came, closer this time — now definitely from inside the house.

They'd moved closer.

Thorne's eyes hardened. "You can. And you will."

He took a slow, steadying breath. "See it as an eye for an eye, Regulus."

Regulus startled.

His face broke into a very strange smile — a mixture of wry, painful and understanding.

"See it as revenge. Revenge for your governor."

Regulus felt like a knife had been driven into his chest. He actually jolted. "What?"

Thorne's gaze was steady. "He was my cousin, you know. Your governor."

Regulus's mind slammed to a halt. Nothing registered. Not a thought

entered, not a thought left.

Thorne swallowed, his voice softer now. "I — I am truly sorry for all the horrid things he did to you, Regulus. I truly am."

Regulus felt his throat tighten, felt the heat prickle at his eyes. Frustration washed over him — he couldn't even do this without crying like a fucking child.

Thorne's voice grew urgent again. "And promise me, Regulus," he said, eyes wide and pleading. "Promise me you'll never tell him — the Dark Lord — about the cloak."

Regulus was, if possible, more confused than ever.

"Never tell the Dark Lord that the cloak exists or who has it in their possession. Can you — can you promise me that?"

"Why?" Regulus rasped, voice hoarse with confusion.

Another sound, distant, chaotic.

"I — I can't explain. There's no time. Just promise me, alright?"

Regulus swallowed, nodding reluctantly.

Thorne's voice came again, quiet but firm. "Kill me, Regulus. Take your revenge."

Another sound — louder. Closer.

Thorne turned an alarming shade of pale, his breath quickening, sweat beading on his forehead. He begged, desperate.

"Please. Please, Regulus — don't let me fall into her claws. Kill me. Do it — *do it now.*"

And Regulus — Regulus didn't know how, his mind reeling, barely able to process what was happening, but somehow, he managed to raise his wand.

Managed to lock gazes with Thorne.

Managed to take in Thorne's gaze — pale, sweating, scared, but also… resigned.

Regulus swallowed.

Straightened.

Lifted his chin.

Nodded.

And then—

One flick of the wrist, two words falling from his lips.

"*Avada Kedavra*."

Chapter End Notes

First: yes, Potter has become 'James' now. After the previous chapter it just felt right ;)

Then: there we are... the end of the second book.

I had such a blast writing this, you have no idea!

I want to thank everyone who took the time and effort to comment. You have no idea how validating, motivating and well, just nice, it is to know you have an audience and to interact with it. So, thank you, truly.

I am exploding with ideas for the third book. I am going to deep clean my life for a week or so but will probably turn to writing very soon.

As always, let me know what you think - also you, silent readers. ;)

Lots of love.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!